

Outspoken: The Lifeworld of Queer Women and Non-Binary Spoken Word Poets

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Abstract

Spoken word and slam poetry have been said to encompass space for all marginalized and oppressed groups and, as such, are important for grassroots poetic activity. However, research on spoken word poets and their communities is limited. In this doctoral research, I employed a critical phenomenological approach in order to meaningfully grasp the ways in which queer voices seek recognition and empowerment through spoken word poetry. To do so, I reflexively probed the lifeworld of queer women and non-binary spoken word poets. Theoretical thematic analysis of 20 one-on-one semi-structured interviews was organized into one overarching theme, three themes, and nine subthemes. Overall, participants of this research used their art form to boldly communicate a queer sexual orientation and/or a gender identity that deviates from the norm; and as such, participated in *Outspoken* (Overarching Theme 1) existence. For example, spoken word afforded interviewees the opportunity to: confidence build; counter invisibilities; and, tackle homo- and transnegativity. Both queer-identified poets and *Outspoken* expression were common among spoken word spaces. Probing deeper into these queer ‘convergences’ (Subtheme 1), the ‘rhetoric’ (Subtheme 2) stemming from participants’ accounts revealed that of a ‘queer counter-public’ (Theme 1). While this counter-public was crucial in fostering *Outspoken* expression, poets also faced particular ‘quandaries’ (Subtheme 3) by virtue of their participation in these subaltern spaces. Relatedly, the ‘queer omnipresence’ (Theme 2) poets experienced at spoken word was significant, as they advantageously used spoken word for queer ‘explorations’ (Subtheme 4) and to detail their unique experiences with queer ‘liminalities’ (Subtheme 5). However, abundant *Outspoken* expression could also lead to undesirable effects or ‘constraints’ (Subtheme 6). Finally, the social and psychological implications of writing and performing emotionally charged and painful *Outspoken* expression are explored in ‘queer affliction’ (Theme 3). Many poets aligned *Outspoken* performances with the familiar concept of ‘catharsis’ (Subtheme 7), but these healing aspects were not uniformly celebrated. The frequency of ‘trauma sharing’ (Subtheme 8) at slam and spoken word was troubled by many interviewees, as was the ‘painfotainment’ (Subtheme 9) value of ‘dangerous’ *Outspoken* expressions. This theoretical analysis of experience-rich data can be used to improve upon the ways we document, understand, and support gender and sexually diverse beings and their subcultural activity.

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As the spoken word poet approaches the stage an audience member calls out, “*remember why you wrote it!*” As a researcher, I also have engaged in this necessary process of self-reflection, which leads me to acknowledge those who supported me along the way.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

What is at once “emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively intense” (Dolan, 2006, p. 165)? Such a question hints at the prospect of lived utopias, and beckons researchers to speculate: What would such a space mean to those involved? What are its far-reaching capacities? What is the value of understanding the other, and hence the self, in deeper and richer terms? To inquire into the radical possibilities of ‘utopian performatives,’ Dolan (2006) looked to the phenomenon of spoken word poetry.

But what do these “emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively intense” expressions mean? In a world “torn apart by dynamics of oppression, manipulation and coercion” (Crotty, 1998, p. 63) it behooves us to inquire: What impacts have these expressions had on the lives that are habitually celebrated in this work – the working-class, the marginal, and the ethnically other (Damon, 1998)? What are the differences between effective and diversionary cultural politics, and how might they be detected (Damon, 1998)? When Dolan (2006) points to utopian performatives as rehearsals or experiments for freedom and social justice, she cautions that such visions, by definition, are based on no place – “the ‘not here’ and the ‘not yet’” (p. 170). Thus, one is left to inquire: can poetry matter (Gioia, 1992)?

Despite its ancient heritage, Zumthor (1990) concedes that “long ago our passion for the spoken word died out,” our aesthetic sensitivity tending to “sacralize the letter” (p. 4). In a fascinating turn of events, poetry is now said to be suffering, if not dead, at the end of print culture (Gioia, 2003). For poetry to survive, or be revived, Gioia (1992) proposed that it be liberated from literary criticism. He lobbied for the sheer joy of the art to come out through performance, for this is how poetry remained vital for centuries. Herein, “poets break through the membrane of convention and the banal, rejecting everyday oppressions and constraints” (Dolan,

2006, p. 169), to arrive somewhere beautiful. To address the query about poetry's worth, I focus on contemporary poetry initiatives that have survived and thrived; that have been birthed.

1.1 Introducing Slam Poetry

Roughly 35 years ago, Marc Smith, a Chicago construction worker, felt compelled to bring poetry back to the people. He had a fondness for visceral, raw, and 'real to life' poetry, and felt academic poetry to be purposefully obtuse and dense (Aptowicz, 2009) with a "lifeless monotone that droned on and on with no consideration for the structure or pacing of the event" (Eleveld, 2003, p. 118). He saw a solution, and 'slam poetry' was invented.

In a slam poetry event, artists are given three minutes to move, impress, and excite their actively involved audience with a passionate presentation of an original piece of work. Judges ($n = 5$), who are selected randomly from the audience, rate the poets' performances Olympic-style, with scores ranging from zero to 10 (Aptowicz, 2009). Poets with the highest scores proceed to subsequent rounds and the poet with the highest cumulative score is crowned the winner.

Somers-Willett (2005), a well-known scholar in the area, once declared: "slam is a phenomenon that has captured America's popular imagination" (p. 51). This popularity of slam poetry in the United States of America (USA) was displayed statistically through the growth of the national scene: in 1990 only two teams competed, but by 2004, 70 teams were involved (Somers-Willett, 2005). While remaining somewhat marginal, slam poetry is arguably the most successful poetry movement of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Gregory, 2008). Though slam poetry has proliferated across the world, it remains most popular in the United Kingdom, the USA, and Canada (Gregory, 2008).

Unlike most theatre, where the audience pays to be a passive spectator, slam poetry involves an active, participating audience. The use of audience judges has been academically

labeled the “institutionalization of the amateur” or the death of the expert (Rivera, 2013, p. 117; Halberstam, 2005). Slam poetry, then, “has given the audience a voice” (Glazner, 2000, p. 11) by inviting them to: score art; snap their fingers to express positive reception; hiss to express negative reception; cheer; heckle; participate when called upon; and, often mill about. Furthermore, the structure of the event is such that players of slam are also spectators, both before and after they take their turn performing.

Slam poetry has been met with controversy. It has been criticized as being blasphemous, an abomination (Cowan, 2009), and dangerous (Xavier, 2005). One prevailing criticism is that the competition elements – the delivery, gimmickry, and ‘show-biz’ aspects – are emphasized over writing itself (Gregory, 2008). Famously, literary critic Harold Bloom announced publicly that slam poetry is the ‘death of art’ (Somers-Willett, 2009; Gregory, 2008). To such critics, slam poetry sanctions mediocrity (Damon, 1998) because performance aspects cheapen the art (Eleveld, 2003). Slam enthusiasts counter by asserting that academic discourse replaces the warmth of voice with the chilliness of text (Eleveld, 2003). Numerous poet-researchers (e.g., Brown, 2011; Gregory, 2008; J. Johnson, 2017; Simon, 2006) have fixated on tensions between academic (i.e., page) and popular (i.e., performance) poetry. However, some scholars call this a false dichotomy as, for instance, various “poets partake in performance poetry, and poets who have slammed may go on to MFA programs” (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 80).

Poetry slam is a “multi-faceted creature” – it has been called “a movement, a philosophy, a form, a genre, a game, a community, an educational device, a career path and a gimmick” (Gregory, 2008, p. 63). Definitions vary and are often rightfully blurred, because, for instance, ‘slam poetry’ and ‘poetry slam’ are not necessarily equivalents (Rivera, 2013). While a ‘poetry slam’ involves the aforementioned “intensely ritualistic” (Rivera, 2013, p. 116) competitive sport

of performing art, ‘slam poetry’ can refer to this and/or a certain aesthetic of spoken word poetry which is not wedded to a particular time and space (Rivera, 2013). Spoken word poetry events that invite people to share their poetry and prose without any form of scoring from the audience are often called open microphone (‘open mic’) shows (Fisher, 2003; J. Johnson, 2017).

Spoken word events often occur on the margins of society (e.g., in bars, cafés, art spaces, and resource centres). These spaces or venues have been called incubators and outlets for artistic creativity (Chepp, 2012). Some researchers maintain that the “venue provides instantaneous affirmation of self-worth and value to the poets” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 265), at least compared to more ‘traditional’ (read solitary) forms of poetry due to the allowable, indeed expected, audience feedback. Craig (2007) found that the consistent pattern of poets’ relations – many spoken word collectives meet weekly – helps to solidify the reciprocity of shared goods (e.g., material texts, affective/effective resources).

With the advent and availability of modern technologies, slam poetry has gone viral. Many poets digitally record and disseminate their texts in the form of short clips on social media (de Bruijn & Oudenhuijsen, 2021) and on other multimodal platforms, for example on ‘Button Poetry,’ a “wildly successful YouTube channel” (J. Johnson, 2017, p. 91). While not the subject of research to date, virtual performances are likely a critical component in sustaining the “liberating spirit” (de Bruijn & Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 753) of slam poetry during unique world events (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic), which pose challenges to traditional methods of operation (i.e., live, in-the-flesh, performances). In creating and maintaining virtual online formats, slam and spoken word organizers have begun to reimagine community-based performance poetry.

The performative mode of spoken word may be comedic, parodic, satirical, or dramatic (Somers-Willett, 2005). Poetic delivery is also diverse; however, certain aesthetic norms in terms

of pace, tempo, and gesticulations do prevail. Poets may: a) memorize their work; b) read off the page/mobile device; or c) occasionally, ad lib/freestyle (i.e., extemporaneous creation of raps, songs, and poetry)¹. Devices such as homophonic wordplay, singing, chanting, beatboxing (i.e., vocal percussion via the mouth, common in hip hop), and the theatrical technique of ‘call and response’ are but a few poetic conventions (Gregory, 2008; Somers-Willett, 2005).

Spoken word poets take an insightful and critical stance to lived experience, with many authors categorically seeing “slam poetry as identity poetry” (de Bruijn & Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 745). Notably, poets are celebrated for being vocal about their identity struggles (Fox, 2010; Somers-Willett, 2005). In this vein, Rivera (2013) saw youth spoken word in New York City place emphasis on autobiography, or *parrhesia* – courageous truth-telling – in order to authenticate their subjectivity. Yet, there is a complex push-pull at play in this first-person narrative (Chepp, 2012; Somers-Willett, 2005): in order to positively impact an audience, original (often painful) experiences must translate in a way that does not extinguish the poet’s spirit (Maddalena, 2009), for slam artists are known to carry an air of coolness (Gregory, 2008).

As mentioned, spoken word poetry differs from formal poetry readings, primarily because the latter is structured around the written word (Gregory, 2008). In its deconstruction of literary elitism, spoken word is said to rely on transparency and clarity of language (Cowan, 2009; Damon, 1998). To “appeal to the masses” (Chepp, 2012, p. 234), poets master the poetic cocktail of: a) a narrative arc; b) rooted in lived experience; with c) strong emotional content. By making it relevant and entertaining to foreign and remote sections of society (Gregory, 2008), slam poetry has been credited as “the ultimate democracy of art” (Woods, 2008, p. 16). This democratic aspect is supported by the fact that: a) anyone can judge a slam; b) poets do not need

any credentials or academic training to participate (and succeed); and c) the spaces incite impromptu, face-to-face political conversations (Fox, 2010).

The tone of slam poems is often passionate (Somers-Willett, 2005), purposefully controversial and, as such, polemical (Chávez, 2010). The content of poems are as diverse and varied as the people who partake, but social justice themes are historically strong components (Fields, Snapp, Russell, Licona, & Tilley, 2014); indeed, some poets treat the slam stage exclusively as a political soapbox (Somers-Willett, 2005). Because spoken word directs the audience's gaze and understanding to the first-person speaker (Schoppelrei, 2019), the art practice has been deemed a form of "public pedagogy" (Biggs-El, 2012, p. 161; Stovall, 2006).

Spoken word poetry is a highly communal practice. Due to its capacity to "evoke emotion among the masses" (Chepp, 2012, p. 241) and its flexible (e.g., transportable) nature (Sjollema & Hanely, 2013), some scholars stress its creative potential to bridge so-called popular and 'legitimate' cultures (Gregory, 2008), and, ultimately, incite social change. However, what is empirically known about its innovation and effectiveness? Research in a youth spoken word context found these voices "may inform policies and practices that are comprehensive in support of sexual health and rights for youth" (Fields et al., 2014, p. 310). In addition to the ability to raise awareness and support individuals to take action (Isler et al., 2015), the apparatus can be adapted to the needs of different contexts and peoples (Gregory, 2008). For example, using a mixed-methods design, Isler and colleagues (2015) saw stigma and limited conversations about HIV in rural communities abate through the use of spoken word. Overall, participants enjoyed the process and their self-efficacy improved, leading Isler et al. (2015) to deem spoken word an "effective vehicle" (p. 33) to deliver messages in innovative, culturally relevant, and sustainable

ways. However, its role as a “bottom-up” (de Bruijn & Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 746) community building tool, specifically for those who are marginalized in society, requires closer reflection.

Compared to other spaces in society, spoken word venues are primarily occupied by marginalized people and their supporters. This new generation of writers and audience members is one traditionally underrepresented in poetry, including youth poets, queer poets, and poets of colour (Aptowicz, 2009). The “recitation style of the poetry slam” is heavily influenced by the oral poetry traditions of the Harlem Renaissance (circa 1920s), the beat poets (circa 1950s and 1960s), the Black Arts Movement (circa 1960s and 1970s), and hip hop (circa 1970s and 1980s) (Rivera, 2013, p. 116). Unsurprisingly, slam has attracted poets of colour in large numbers² (Halberstam, 2005). Those who attend spoken word events and poetry slams are “largely (and proudly) liberal, under 35, outspoken, and very politically sensitive” (Somers-Willett, 2005, p. 58). Somers-Willett (2005) focuses on the predominance of African American poets at the national level, but maintains that audiences are mostly white, middle-class, and under 40. Those from the margins may be drawn to spoken word poetry because they are not limited to generalizations and stereotypes in these spaces (Fisher, 2003). The art form can be used to disrupt previously held beliefs (e.g., stereotypes) to demonstrate instead a preferred (e.g., less hegemonic, more nuanced) depiction. In this sense, spoken word poetry is said to be at the vanguard of “counter-cultural performance” (Somers-Willett, 2005, p. 58; Wheeler, 2008).

During times of struggle, people bind together and endure (A. Johnson, 2009). Through poetry, people create value and meaning out of struggles and, in *community-based* poetry, these struggles can resonate and unify (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014). Poetry is but one strategy minority persons have drawn on to achieve some semblance of justice and compassion in our society. Chepp (2012) posits that subjugated knowledges are often conveyed through oratory (e.g.,

lectures, speeches, testimonies, sermons, jokes, folklore, childhood rhymes), kinetic (e.g., dance/movement), and visual art forms. Spoken word poets rely on an alternative medium to understand themselves and speak back to authorities that ignore, trivialize, or regulate their knowledges, perspectives, and actions (Fields et al., 2014).

Spoken word events set a “distinctive, immediate, and emergent stage for a poet and audience members to engage in face-to-face dialogues about taboo issues” (Fox, 2010, p. 424), such as those surrounding gender and sexuality. (Queer) poets routinely tackle up-to-the-minute topics and issues that face lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) peoples. Researchers have noted that “sexuality and expression of sexuality, specifically without being bound to normative gender roles” (Fields et al., 2014, p. 316) is a common theme in spoken word poetry. To (re)create, shape, and reiterate gender and sexually diverse identities, artists may poetically reflect on topics such as queer history, coming out, and past sexual encounters (Fox, 2010). To take a specific example, early slam star Reggie Cabico explored the topic of “fetishism of race within the homosexual community” (Aptowicz, 2009, p. 385).

While Somers-Willett (2005) pays attention to the representation of race in spoken word (i.e., the predominance of African American poets), the contributors to Olson’s (2007) poetry anthology, *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution*, focus on gender (i.e., the predominance of men). In the words of prominent queer spoken word poet, Andrea Gibson: in a “sea of Y chromosomes, I felt spotlighted, like a woman with a capital W” (Olson, 2007, p. 216). Indeed, aside from this specialized anthology, turn of the century spoken word poetry collections do appear to be largely comprised of men’s work (e.g., Eleveld’s [2003] anthology contained nine female and 38 male contributors). Similarly, research at this time emphasized male involvement. One of Gregory’s (2008) interviewees mentioned how “a lot of

boys... working class boys... find their own voice” (p. 74) through the art form. Recent research saw the “ascent of women in the slam scene” (de Bruijn & Oudenhuisen, 2021, p. 748) in West and Central Africa, where the scholars regarded a small network of female slam poets as pioneers in the search for a voice in public debates.

Concerns with gender (and other identity) imbalances in spoken word have been raised. These spoken word artists, scholars, and spectators – many of them feminist queer women of colour – have documented their unease and disgruntlement with slam poetry specifically (e.g., see Chávez, 2010; Cowan, 2009; Halberstam, 2005). In Staceyann Chin’s poem ‘Don’t Want to Slam,’ the lesbian Jamaican-Chinese artist calls the apparatus a staged revolution – “a spectacle of word pimps selling lines and rhymes for a quick ‘ten’ from the judges” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 168). Given such bitter reactions, can it still be assumed that spoken word encompasses space for “all marginalized and oppressed groups” (A. Johnson, 2009, p. 207)? How can a “pointed critique of slamming” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 168) be used to conceptualize and strategize ways to empower minority persons? Ultimately, by probing for answers to such questions, the nuances of grassroots poetic activity could be unveiled so that researchers and activists could improve upon the ways they document, support, and celebrate gender and sexually diverse peoples.

Next, I delve deeper into literature on spoken word poetry. Working from the fact that spoken word has received very little academic attention (Gregory, 2008), I organize this limited body of literature into four core conceptual areas: a) resistance; b) community; c) healing; and, d) identity politics. These areas are particularly relevant to my doctoral research and speak to the significance and richness of human social life. By virtue of their consistent, yet seemingly controversial, presence in these poetic spaces (Olson, 2007), queer women and non-binary poets are a relevant demographic through which to explore these areas. Thus, by discussing each area,

and the many unresolved and germane questions that arise, my rationale for studying the lifeworld of queer women and non-binary spoken word poets will be brought to life.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Resistance

Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. – Audre Lorde

Poetry is a resource drawn on to face the indescribable: “great faith, beauty, love, loss, crisis, and devastation” (Craig, 2007, p. 267). In an oft-cited essay, ‘Poetry is Not a Luxury,’ Lorde (2009) spoke of a hidden place where the spirit abides, grows, and rises. This “mysterious reserve” is the source of creativity and power and points to the poet’s “most cherished terrors” (p. 357). Poetry, to Lorde (2009), is not just a dream or vision; it provides a bridge across fears toward tangible action. Is it within the performances of these oxymoronic ‘cherished terrors’ that profound resistance³ to the systemic social inequities behind oppression and marginalization manifest? Are there potential freedoms to engaging in spoken word poetry?

Scholars have begun to inquire into the unique role spoken word poetry can play in the pursuit of social justice and change (e.g., Chepp, 2012; Dill, 2013). The art form has allowed those who are oppressed to voice their experiences of struggle, and it has been recognized in this capacity as “an empowerment tool” (Fields et al., 2014, p. 312). Fields and colleagues (2014) saw young people come together through spoken word to “collectively resist deficit-driven assumptions about their lives and to express lived and desired knowledges” (p. 310). Likewise, Rivera (2013) saw a New York City youth spoken word group develop “rhetorical tactics to confront various issues within their communities” (p. 115) as they regularly write from “a point of resistance to marginality and normativity” (p. 122). In this sense, the “art form clearly assists

people with their survival in an environment that shows hostility towards them” (A. Johnson, 2009, p. 207) and, as such, has been called an “indispensable resource” (Rivera, 2013, p. 115).

Resistance through writing and performance can take many forms. To illustrate: renowned Asian-American slam poet, Beau Sia, has been known to embody a manic demeanor and quirky appearance on stage in an effort to disrupt portrayals of Asian-Americans as quiet and meek (Aptowicz, 2009). Further, those afflicted with stereotypes (e.g., racist, homonegative) can turn themselves into perfect parodies via performance (e.g., burlesque) and, through the process, render those endorsing the stereotypes victims of their own ignorance (Jackson, 2010). For example, Rachel Wiley, a “Feminist, Queer, Fat, Mixed Femme Girl” (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 78), has been said to interpolate hegemonic notions of sizeism and fatphobia into her slam poetry as a statement of defiance. Another example is the ‘persona piece’ in which the poet makes a “unique transmutation” (Somers-Willett, 2005, p. 70) by taking on the role of another on stage. Participants mimic someone who is clearly different from themselves and, thus, the performance is pressed toward a political statement. For instance, Somers-Willett (2005) discusses Black spoken word artist Patricia Smith’s poem ‘Skinhead’ in which she takes on the identity of a White supremacist to ask the audience, forcefully, to consider America’s implicit support of racist attitudes. By reclaiming pejorative words (Schoppelrei, 2019) and exhibiting initiatives of ‘the proud,’ hypocrisies are revealed and challenged (Turner, 1969).

Appropriations of an oppressor’s vilified and derogatory language can be highly strategic. To use this language “half-joking against oneself and one’s own kind” tears it from the “oppressor’s grasp, asserting control over it, and nullifying it” (Jackson, 2010, p. 140). Significantly, this phenomenon suggests a subversive quality to poetic mimesis, as players are able to negate cultural codes (Babcock, 1978). Furthermore, artistic reversals can have

substantial impacts on audience understanding. For this reason, social justice activists applaud performance poetry's capacity to provide marginalized people with "a very forceful" (Sjollem & Hanley, 2013, p. 66) means of self-expression and engagement with the wider community.

1.2.1.1 Queering resistance. How does the concept of resistance specifically speak to those who fall on the queer spectrum? In terms of sexuality and gender-based oppression, spoken word poetry can offer a space to express "lived fluidities" (Fields et al., 2014, p. 316) and to resist and reconfigure imposed identities. The art form can be used to raise awareness about issues specific to those who are LGBTQ+. For example, Fields et al. (2014) analyzed a youth spoken word poem containing a litany of disheartening quality of life statistics for queer youth. The analysis showed that spoken word poetry offers a "textured representation of the quotidian experiences of marginalized youth" (p. 318), which speaks to the ubiquity of restrictive gender/sexuality narratives (e.g., those in educational settings).

In what ways do gender and sexual minority persons seek recognition through artistic representation? Chepp (2012), citing Scott's (1990) influential work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, argues that "epistemological worldviews and political practices of marginalized communities are often overlooked in mainstream historical accounts" (p. 224). Unsurprisingly, this oversight is tethered to larger systems of social power and inequality, including patriarchy, cisnormativity, and heterosexism. So, the question becomes: how do the influences of hegemonic structures, such as rampant categorization (Barnard, 1996) and medicalization (Good, 1994), come out through the 'arts of resistance' (Scott, 1990)? What moments of possibility are created "through the dismantling of oppressive ideologies" (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 84)?

Regarding the current study, what are non-binary and queer women poets resisting through spoken word? A potential area of interest is that of recognition. As a threat to patriarchal

power, throughout history, lesbian and queer women have been made invisible in our culture (Nielsen, 2016). This ‘ghosting’ of queer women – rendered invisible, with only muted and veiled appearances – has been documented in various social texts, including literature, film, and television (Castle, 1993; Faderman, 1991; Robertson, 1996; Wilton, 1995). In discussing lesbian poetry, Bulkin (1978) pointed out that “lesbians seemed to have come from nowhere, from a great blankness with only a few shadowy figures to suggest a history” (p. 7). In a more recent case study of a slam artist with a “full body intersection” (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 75), the ways “queer” becomes “straight” to “the normative eye” (p. 77) was redressed on stage. Does the phenomenon of contemporary spoken word poetry constitute a relatively frank presence – a non-muted, non-veiled form of artistic expression and self-identification?

1.2.2 Community

To have great poets, there must be great audiences, too. – Walt Whitman

The above conceptual area is mediated by the structure of spoken word and slam poetry; namely, resistance-inclined poets share *and* witness multiple experiences and multiple subjectivities (Rivera, 2013). Other art forms are traditionally created and consumed in a more solitary fashion (e.g., paintings, novels), but verbal art forms are “fundamentally social in that an audience is necessarily present when they are enacted” (Chepp, 2012, p. 234). In this sense, scholars name several benefits that confer from spoken word collectives, such as social support and connecting with others (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014). Various poetry programs (e.g., June Jordan’s ‘Poetry for the People’) make explicit the ties between poetry and a social movement (Aptowicz, 2009; Fields et al., 2014; A. Johnson, 2006). Indeed, some equate the art form with a ‘revolution’ (e.g., Eleveld, 2003; A. Johnson, 2009; Olson, 2007).

As spoken word is communal in nature, it becomes a visceral medium for teaching about the world (Chepp, 2012; Olson, 2007; Schoppelrei, 2019). A number of scholarly works have been geared towards integrating a “spoken word curriculum” into the classroom (Brown, 2011; Chepp, 2012, p. 238). In that the goal is to challenge oppression, counter dominant ideologies, raise critical consciousness, and achieve freedom (as explored above), much of the pedagogy of spoken word aligns with Freire’s (1970) ground-breaking work entitled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Scholars who have made this connection between spoken word and education and/or activism consider poets as capable of “bringing to the forefront things normally excluded from dominant discourse” (A. Johnson, 2009, p. 206; Schoppelrei, 2019).

Though some researchers equate spoken word with “young adults in urban communities” (Chepp, 2012, p. 222), others emphasize the wide diversity of people who participate. Much like a small village, scholars deem spoken word communities multigenerational, in which circular knowledge sharing takes place: the young learn from elders; elders learn from the young (Fisher, 2003). Accordingly, many poets refer to their particular spoken word communities as their ‘slam family’ (e.g., J. Johnson, 2010; Maddalena, 2009; Somers-Willett, 2009). Fisher (2003) called a Sacramento spoken word hub a ‘sacred space’ akin to a church for people of African descent in which the delivery of spoken word poems is equated with the offerings made by a sermon.

Does spoken word provide a unique or ‘sacred space’ where players can speak openly? If so, how do structural aspects of a shared venue play into this concept? In *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Boal (1985) argued that a shared political atmosphere is dependent on audience and performers’ roles becoming indistinguishable; likewise, in spoken word, ‘artist’ and ‘non-artist’ are indistinct. Spoken word’s performer-spectator exchange has been called ‘utopian performatives’ (Dolan, 2006). In this context, ‘utopian’ stems from the “affective and effective

feelings and expressions of hope and love not just for a partner as the domestic scripts of realism so often empathize, but for other people, for a more abstracted notion of ‘community’” (Dolan, 2006, p. 164). In the utopian mode, participants “call established systems of power into question” (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 321) so that everyday culturally predictable behaviours assumed to be axiomatic and unchanging – “ingrained and overlooked” (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 84) – are revealed and challenged (Turner, 1969). Spoken word poets can provide a voice to defy dominant discourse by presenting “opportunities to recognize the various quotidian manifestations” (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 78) of said discourse. How could a study of spoken word communities add to socio-cultural understandings of modern utopias?

1.2.2.1 Queer subculture. Spoken word and slam poetry may be interpreted as a subculture as it contains a “set of social rituals which underpin [participants’] collective identity and define them as a ‘group’ instead of a mere collection of individuals” (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts, 1993, p. 35). Another concept applicable to spoken word community is that of counter-publics. Counter-publics are “alternate spaces aware of their subordinate status” (A. Johnson, 2009, p. 205) that assert difference through performance and oppositional discourse. According to A. Johnson (2009), who calls spoken word communities counter-publics, a primary goal of these discursive and physical spaces is to affirm emerging, dissident identities that seek to challenge hegemonic structures. The idea of a queer counter-public was raised by Halberstam (2005) who connects queer/dyke punk subculture to specific lesbian slam poets like Alix Olson and Staceyann Chin. Likewise, Krpan’s (2008) analysis of Chin’s poetry is that it resists homonormativity, and embraces her role as an “unsavoury queer” (p. 21).

Further data are needed on the “coalitional consciousness and collective action” (Fields et al., 2014, p. 319) manifesting in women- and queer-based spoken word poetry. Considering

Staceyann Chin “is as likely to appear in a nightclub as at a rally, at a conference as on the street” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 168), the ways location affects the message and meaning of queer spoken word requires better understanding. What is the meaning of a community whose “audience applauded admirably” (Rivera, 2013, p. 119) to persons outing themselves on stage? What are the benefits of a blatant affirmation of ‘othered’ identities?

1.2.3 Healing

Spoken word poetry saves lives. – Unknown

What psychological benefits can spoken word poets claim through the creation of art? Are the benefits as simple as “improving their creativity and literacy levels” (Gregory, 2008, p. 72) and public speaking abilities or is something more substantial occurring? To what extent is the concept of Aristotelian catharsis – the purification of unpleasant emotion through art – at play here? Rivera (2013) posits that performing spoken word poetry constitutes a form of self-sacrifice, “a means of embracing one’s inner vulnerability” (p. 119) in a manner that is appealing to various people. Gregory (2008) contends that slam has been perceived as supplying something therapeutic and overlooked by the mainstream (e.g., traditional education systems). It is argued that writing and performing can offer deeper meanings about personal events: in this way, the medium is seen as an “active coping mechanism” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 267).

Though few published studies (see Alvarez & Mearns, 2014; Maddalena, 2009) have looked at the “therapeutic working of slam poetry” (de Bruijn & Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 749), a broader literature notes how emotional writing can alter the narrative, disclosure, and recoding of a traumatic event. In the aftermath of disruption, Becker (1997) highlighted the process of life reconstruction through art (in this case, painting). Jackson (2010) remarked that solidarity with others’ suffering moves the locus of defenses from intrapsychic to intersubjective. Through the

performance process, what is usually sealed up and inaccessible is drawn forth (Turner, 1982) and sheltered from destruction (Zumthor, 1990). Thus, performance might actually be “the proper finale” to a suffering experience where poets cry out for “penetrative, imaginative understanding” (Kristeva, 1982; Turner, 1982, p. 13).

In their one-on-one interviews with 10 spoken word poets, Alvarez and Mearns (2014) noted unanimous agreement that cathartic release and resolution were found through writing and performing. For example, the participants drew on a number of metaphors – some clichéd, some more inventive – to describe experiences of purging emotion. The use of metaphor is of interest to qualitative researchers (e.g., Willig, 2008) as a linguistic device to represent, share, and transform human experience (Becker, 1997; Fernandez, 1974); yet, this rich aspect of the participants’ discourse was not explored.

In qualitative research conducted by Maddalena (2009), the scholar probed eight participants about the resolution of internal conflict through performing slam poetry. Her research indicated that spoken word poets can “transform-hurt-into-art” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 227) through the performance of the same poem multiple times– akin to therapeutic sessions (e.g., art therapists’ treatment of PTSD). She found poets were cognizant of the process of taking their original emotional components (i.e., “primal scream[s]” [p. 226]) and organizing them into something with communicative power. A. Johnson (2009) likewise asserted that spoken word is a useful and functional way to cope with stress. Thus, positive mental health benefits have been detected but specific nuances surrounding the healing process remain unclear.

Could sharing personal narratives in the form of poetry create “empathic resonance with peers” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 224)? Since spoken word poets are said to be spokespeople for the underappreciated and voiceless members of their community (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014),

cathartic benefits may extend beyond the artist to the recipients of their work (A. Johnson, 2009). A ‘successful’ slam poem, scholars say, is written ‘for the audience’ (i.e., they are expected to enjoy themselves) but simultaneously honours the poet’s emotions. Maddalena (2009) calls this finding the “healing encapsulation” (p. 227) as it brings the poet feelings of strength and value.

To those who have been silenced or ignored, spoken word offers a platform for these individuals to present their lives and experiences (Chepp, 2012; Fisher, 2003). Although Chepp (2012) remarked that marginalized groups disguising social critique is a thing of the past, she concedes that poets nonetheless draw on “rhyme, rhythm, repetition, improvisation, and word play” (p. 232) to showcase oppositional politics. Slam presents oppressed peoples with a format to imagine alternative futures (Gregory, 2008). A key question for my thesis is how do gender and sexual minority people heal through spoken word?

1.2.3.1 Queer healing rites/rights. As spoken word poetry begins to gain recognition and popularity, so do its capacities to influence society, thereby operating as a decisive agent of social change (Chepp, 2012). The ties spoken word communities have to outreach programs, such as those in “high schools, prisons, and mental hospitals” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 222) and LGBTQ+ resource centres (Fields et al., 2014), suggest it has the capacity to ignite change and healing. In this outreach/clinical sense, spoken word’s resemblance to art therapies should be probed. The ritual/ceremonial aspects of slam described earlier, for example, may be thematically similar to psychotherapy (Maddalena, 2009), but, of course, in a radically different – more economical and potentially more inviting (e.g., less stigmatizing) – setting.

In a world where statistics reveal that many “LGBT, questioning and gender non-normative kids respond with suicide” (Chávez, 2010, p. 447), researchers should be motivated to shed light on any cathartic and healing qualities of marginalized people’s art forms. It is crucial

to better understand, for example, how slam “provides an opportunity to simultaneously archive and dramatize gay-related hate crimes that tend to go under-reported” (Fox, 2010, p. 422).

Researchers can play a crucial outreach role here; for example, by connecting youth-based poetry collectives with organizations devoted to supporting LGBTQ+ youth (see Fields et al., 2014).

While scholars are investigating the status of prejudice, discrimination, and overall injustice toward gender and sexual minority persons, what might we learn from bottom-up efforts to repair such injustice? Can spoken word liberate human beings from strict moral codes, sexual or otherwise; codes that many are frightened to transcend? How does one recuperate an abject status (Rivera, 2013)? To answer these questions, the confessional moment, the proclamation of self (Somers-Willett, 2005), so central to spoken word, must be inspected.

1.2.4 Identity Politics

All oppression is connected, you dick. – Staceyann Chin

A defining characteristic of slam poetry is the poet’s performance of identity (Chepp, 2012; Olson, 2007; Somers-Willett, 2005). As an identity-based art form, poetry communities are rife with stakes, claims, and politics⁴. Recall that frequenters of spoken word appear “liberal, rebellious, hip, and against the status quo” (Somers-Willett, 2005, p. 59). Unsurprisingly, then, most local slam competitions feature and reward the work of artists who interrogate “identity-related marginalization” (Fox, 2010, p. 426). At spoken word, diverse communities come together to disclose their vulnerabilities in a tightly shared space (Williamson, 2015); thus, these venues are a prime locale to gain understanding of current identity politics⁵.

Poetry venues have been called “incubators and outlets for artistic creativity” and a space to “support counter-hegemonic identities through art” (Chepp, 2012, p. 242). For instance, drawing on the concept of utopia, Dolan (2006) saw a Broadway spoken word poetry production

(i.e., *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam*) to project a harmonizing, panoply of identities. Likewise, researchers have suggested that poets find “both writing and performing create a safe place” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 267). However, this finding requires closer inspection. Can safety be ensured in such a highly intersubjective, emotionally potent arena? If some people feel left out, silenced, or attacked – in a place of purported acceptance, no less – could their trust in a community become tainted or destroyed? Given the critical implications of such questions, consider the romanticism evident in Aptowicz’s (2009) statement:

[Poets] wanted the audience to forget they were necessarily seeing a ‘poet’ on stage, but rather a peer, or even a friend, telling it like it is...they wanted the ‘slam stage’ to almost disappear, for you to forget that you were even at a poetry reading. (p. 386)

In contrast to this idealistic vantage, which does not appear to take into account any costs of “telling it like it is,” one spoken word ethnographer felt “othered, silenced, powerless, or just plain weird because of what poets performed, read, or talked about” (A. Johnson, 2009, p. 212). Her following passage speaks to the tension between identity empowerment and (furthered) identity oppression in spoken word poetry:

When poets performed poems that spoke to my experiences and clarified my life for me as a victim of one of those ideologies, I felt a sense of empowerment, hope, and positive energy. The same poem, however, could invoke feelings of anger and silence depending upon the language used by the poet, or the institutionalized modes of dominance that leaked out of the text like an infected wound. I took careful notes during these moments of weirdness, knowing that something important hid within the crevice of that contradiction. In the small cracks lurked significant data where empowerment met silence, clarity met confusion, and dominance met subordination. (p. 212)

Who could speak further to this elusive yet significant data and what sort of approach would it require on the part of the researcher? While research with spoken word poets has emphasized improved psychological health from social integration (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014) and the meaningful relationships (Maddalena, 2009) found at slam, A. Johnson's (2009) critical research has nuanced these findings.

Recall that slam poets are lauded for being spokespeople for the underappreciated and voiceless members of their community (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014). However, the question of erasure becomes a concern because where there is *speaking for* there is inevitably *silence about* others. This trend is referred to as "discursive imperialism" (Alcoff, 1991, p. 18), a problem those with voice find themselves in "by virtue of having that voice" (Chávez, 2010, p. 448). The progressive or radical label applied to slam has been troubled as it "can disguise the ways in which people fight for the liberation of one group while actively suppressing another" (J. Johnson, 2017, p. 21). Chávez (2010), for instance, calls out Fox's (2010) "poetic e-race-ure" (p. 449) of the lived realities of those with HIV; namely, that despite being historically imagined as a white gay male disease, the virus now disproportionately impacts communities of colour and lower-class individuals. Likewise, A. Johnson (2009) scrutinized a non-gay Black poet who 'spewed' images of gay anal rape in order to provide a forceful commentary on American power structures: a "metaphor for the cruel and unequal treatment of oppressed minorities" (p. 213) which, ultimately, came at the expense of another oppressed minority.

How do identity politics play out in the context of spoken word? Which identities are privileged/celebrated? How *authentic* (i.e., sincere) is this celebration? Spoken word poets have been called the politically correct police (Dolan, 2006) and cultural watchdogs (Cowan, 2009),

but what is at the heart of this watchful eye? Damon (1998) cautions about the critical difference between effective and diversionary cultural politics by emphasizing that:

Populist/democratic venues are mere palliatives whose flamboyance and surface-level engagement threaten to divert us from the fact that many of the lives celebrated in this work (working-class, marginal, ethnically other, etc.) are getting harder and harder, even while it becomes trendier and trendier to celebrate them. (p. 327)

Problematically, such “reactionary populism” (Damon, 1998, p. 328) has gone virtually undetected by social scientists. Chepp (2012) reported that her participants “talk about their poetry as a vehicle for moving people to act, inspiring people to be better, teaching people things previously unknown” (p. 239). However, are there potential concerns with slam poets who “take a professorial stance” (Aptowicz, 2009, p. 388) on stage? Are researchers being swayed by romanticism when they regard poets as “social prophets” (Dolan, 2006, p. 169) who “serve God or the universe” (Chepp, 2012, p. 240)? Discussion on identity politics specific to gender and sexuality should help elucidate this line of thought.

1.2.4.1 Queer politics, gender politics. According to scholars, a fundamental belief among spoken word communities is that everyone has something important to say and deserves active listening (Dolan, 2006; Fisher, 2003); however, a few skeptical scholars object. For instance, in J. Johnson’s (2010) critical ethnography the scholar found sexism and homophobia were rampant and unchecked in Los Angeles’ slam and spoken word communities. He remarked on the absence of queer bodies and abundance of heterosexual men. Scholars, according to J. Johnson (2010), have romanticized spoken word communities by championing their “remarkable diversity, political potential, or chimerical possibilities” (p. 397).

However, J. Johnson's (2010) work contained almost no data (e.g., interview extracts, textual poetry) from women and queer people, save for a brief extract from a female poet who refers to the community as a boy's club. The ethnographic work of feminist researcher-poets, Maher (2009) and A. Johnson (2006), corroborate this claim. After a number of adverse encounters in the field, A. Johnson (2006) facilitated female-only focus groups to discuss sexism in spoken word communities. Likewise, Maher (2009), through theoretical sampling, sought out female poets after noticing female marginalization and overt sexualization on the scene (i.e., she refers to "dirty old men" [p. 16]).

While "critics and poets alike typically underscore slam poetry's ability to confront societal issues and grow activism" (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 82), little focus has been placed on any growing *pains* associated with these political testimonies (Chepp, 2016). What are the lived experiences of the people embedded in such claims? How do they understand this experience, and how 'common sense' is their story (Braun & Clarke, 2013)? Are there "larger social and historical processes of which the actors are only dimly aware" (Good, 1994, p. 62)? The state of existing inquiry suggests a critical phenomenological lens is of utmost importance in order to detect any nuanced identity politics that unfold.

1.2.5 Research Gap

Investigating four central areas of the cutting-edge phenomenon of (queer) spoken word poetry has broadened my understanding of this intriguing form of art, but many questions remain and answers are needed. How can a close study of a subversive form of art reveal deeper appreciation for queer lived realities? To answer this question, I recap: a) the overall status of research, focusing on the 'gaps'; and then provide, b) suggestions to improve this scholarship.

As stated earlier, research on spoken word poetry is scarce (Gregory, 2008). A handful of studies across various disciplines (e.g., English, Communication Studies, Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Women’s Studies, and Education) have begun to shed light on the topic. Inquiry has mostly been conducted in America (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014; Chepp, 2012; Fields et al., 2014; Freitas, 2012), favouring California (Escoto, 2013; Fisher, 2003; A. Johnson, 2009; J. Johnson, 2010; Maddalena, 2009; Maher, 2009; Vernon, 2008) and New York (Aptowicz, 2009; Craig, 2007; Gregory, 2008; Rivera, 2013). A few studies have emerged from Canada (Cowan, 2009; Craig, 2007; Dill, 2013; Tenn-Yak, 2014). No prior work has been deeply phenomenological; that is, devoted to a meaning-centered analysis of participants’ accounts.

Further, perhaps stemming from the novelty of this research area, a broad and rather non-reflexive approach has been taken. Psychological research on spoken word poetry, to date, has conceptualized interview data in a *descriptive* way, without critical inspection of latent meanings; hence, participant extracts were often left uncontextualized without adequate analysis of ambiguous, highly charged, or polysemic terms. For instance, a poet-participant’s statement that he/she/they “became less individualistic and more generous – trying to get someone else to feel something, not just me” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 265) requires clarification. In this context, what, exactly, was the participant trying to make the audience feel? And how was his/her/their generosity received? Further, a finding that poets “desire to make a unique imprint on the fabric of the spoken word community” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 266) without saying *what* the uniqueness entails, or detailing any consequences of risk-taking on stage is, simply put, incomplete. By probing for deeper meanings, researchers could rectify these errors.

The majority of prior spoken word research has conducted ethnographies into very specific communities to which the researcher is an ‘insider’ (e.g., Fields et al., 2014). However,

intimate familiarity can occlude a researcher's perspective, either by failing to see (i.e., 'cultural blinders'), or be critical of, various emergent phenomena. For instance, one critical ethnographer's attempts described above to explore his own scene's "gender inequity and queer troubles" (J. Johnson, 2010, p. 401) came up short, for any effort to mitigate his social closeness was not conveyed. It is an agreed upon tenet of ethnography that researchers should approach human beings not as transparent subjects, but as complete enigmas (Geertz, 1973). Qualitative inquirers are to stay close to the data because "when the focus on the object is lost, inquiry readily becomes very subjectivist – even, at times, narcissistic" (Crotty, 1998, p. 85).

Furthermore, numerous past researchers (e.g., Fisher, 2003; Maher, 2009; Vernon, 2008) interviewed *all* who attend slams, including: poets, hosts, audience members, venue managers, organizers, and critics. Maher (2009), for example, interviewed "any person" who showed up to a "public poetry event in Sacramento" (p. 80), likely to maximize her sample size. Similarly, Fisher (2003) made links between poets, event organizers, and audience members in order to "capture a range of experiences" (p. 367). However, spoken word communities are transient and ill-defined (Chepp, 2012); and, as such, scholars who interviewed anyone present and willing, have tended to sacrifice depth and precision. In sum, this inquiry lacked penetrating research questions, deliberate sampling strategies, and carefully executed modes of analysis.

To enhance the methodological rigour in the current research, I investigated the topic of spoken word poetry with specific research questions (and sub-questions) in mind. A systematic approach was employed to answer best *these* questions and, ultimately, produce deep structures of meaning that constitute poets' worldviews.

1.3 Research Questions

RQ #1: What are the lived experiences of queer women and non-binary spoken word poets? Sub-questions: How does *sociality* – the “interpersonal nuances” (Ashworth, 2015, p. 26) of poets’ lifeworld – affect their lived experience? Similarly, how does *spatiality* (poets’ *embodiment* and the *atmosphere*) affect their lived experience?

RQ #2: How do queer women and non-binary spoken word poets convey queerness through art? Sub-question: How do they conceptualize their experiences with disclosing various identities through oral poetry?

RQ # 3: Why do queer women and non-binary poets perform spoken word poetry? Sub-questions: How do they conceptualize their experiences as ‘out’ queer and non-binary artists? What personal, pedagogical, and/or political functions does the art form serve? Does the apparatus contain any liberatory aspects or salutary effects for queer peoples?

1.3.1 Personal Reflexive Statement

For qualitative researchers, it is best practice to “refuse to wear the charge of being abstract intellectualisers, [somehow] divorced from experience and action” (Crotty, 1998, p. 17). Social researchers, in particular, are integral to each and every stage of research (as ethnographers have phrased it, they *are* a research instrument). Subjectivity is valued, as engaging in a reflexive exercise is a means of quality control by making transparent the ways in which researchers influence the research process (Yardley, 2008).

It bears mentioning, first and foremost, that I find liminal subculture endlessly stimulating. I am particularly drawn to verbal forms of resistance and public artistic expression; and, as a frequent attendee of slam and spoken word events from 2012-2017, intellectual and critical discourse between me and my participants had “idiomatic similarities” (Madden, 2010, p. 62). Indeed, a strength of this research is that I possess a degree of familiarity with the

slam/spoken word community. However, never having competed in a poetry slam, I remain, to some extent, culturally ignorant (Madden, 2010).

My connections to LGBTQ+ communities run very deep. Being raised in a queer/lesbian home, prior to what is colloquially known as ‘the gayby boom,’ rendered me as ‘other’ in relation to my peers (i.e., children born of heterosexual parents). One of my parents is an artist, the other a sociologist; so, at a young age, I was exposed to social justice issues and artistic ways of redressing them. My queer roots have taught me not only to celebrate diversity but also to recognize crucial similarities across intersecting modes of oppression (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, gender). One aspect of my existence that drives my scholarly efforts is a fascination with self-disclosures of gender and sexual alterity, whether in a classroom (e.g., professors; see Nielsen & Alderson, 2014) or on stage (e.g., poets). This curiosity was spawned, at least partially, from my own fear and avoidance of such self-disclosures, which are cyclically required as someone who is heterosexual and “female in appearance” (Madraga, Nielsen & Morrison, 2018, p. 1005) but whose queerness punctuates my experiences over my lifespan.

Like Halberstam (2005), I am “committed to archiving, celebrating, and analyzing queer subcultures” (p. 156) before subcultural fatigue sets in or they are outright dismissed by mass culture. For instance, my comprehensive exams looked at two cutting-edge topics: a) bareback sex in the gay male community (see Nielsen & Morrison, 2019); and b) lesbian women’s camp expressions (see Nielsen, 2016). I enter the current project aware that I have a stake in this sense, as academics play a role in archiving queer subcultures but, as explained above, I remain open to emergent findings that point to, for example, community shortcomings.

Qualitative research is deeply rooted in the social and subjective experience of the inquirer. In this spirit, I provide ongoing reflexive commentary (Braun & Clarke, 2013), as

multi-level engagement can help with “linguistic and cultural blind spots” (Levy & Hollan, 1998, p. 354). In the following chapter, I discuss the theoretical underpinnings of this doctoral research, as well as the concrete techniques and procedures I employed in its execution.

Chapter 2: Methodology

This chapter delves into the social research process. Starting with the foundations (i.e., the history and philosophy behind my qualitative inquiry), I will discuss ontology (i.e., critical realism) and epistemology (i.e., social constructionism) followed by theoretical traditions (i.e., interpretivism and critical traditions). Through this conceptual exploration, a diverse research perspective, termed ‘critical phenomenology,’ begins to take shape. (Refer to Figure 1 in Appendix A for a systematic representation of my personal framework.) Lastly, I provide an account of the specific techniques and strategies I used in order to enter participants’ lifeworld.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Ontology and Epistemology

Ontology and epistemology are the deepest and most penetrating – though often the most obscure – aspects of research. These two elements inform qualitative researchers’ theoretical perspective. Ontology is the study of reality or being. Ontologically, I take a critical realist stance in this research. This position falls between realism (i.e., realities exist outside the mind) and relativism (i.e., reality is dependent on the way we come to know it), in that a pre-social reality exists but it can only ever be partially known (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Epistemology is the theory of knowledge; it is a way of understanding and explaining what we know (Crotty, 1998). Constructionism is the epistemological viewpoint that all knowledge and meaningful reality are contingent upon the interaction between human beings and their world (Crotty, 1998); that it is developed and transmitted socially, renders the process *social* constructionism.

2.1.2 Theoretical Traditions

Like all research undertakings, there is a “complexus of assumptions buried within” (Crotty, 1998, p. 66) the way I do research. These are the philosophical stances that stem from

my broader ontological and epistemological positions; to be explicit, *interpretivism* and *critical traditions*, both of which contain specific sub-theoretical posturing. I strategically draw from these theories to inform my methodology and specific methods of research.

2.1.2.1 Interpretivism “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). The philosophy of intepretivism leads to two distinct camps: *phenomenology* and *interactionism*.

2.1.2.1.1 Phenomenology. Phenomenology and psychology emerged around the same time (late 1800s) and both concern the study of consciousness; thus, it fits that the former be adapted to a science to serve the latter (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Phenomenologists see a bountiful world teeming with potential meaning (Crotty, 1998). The interest in everyday life as lived *within a particular meaningful realm* is what led to Husserl’s fundamental concept of the ‘lifeworld’ (Ashworth, 2015), defined as a system of interrelated meanings bound up in totality. Human beings occupy many lifeworlds, and each contain universal features: “temporality, spatiality, subjective embodiment, intersubjectivity, selfhood, personal project, moodedness, and discursiveness” (Ashworth, 2008, p. 12). These features or ‘fractions’ (Ashworth, 2015) often prove indispensable for ‘getting at’ an experience that is common across a group of people.

Phenomenology is often equated with the study of experience. However, in line with the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this branch of philosophy, the study of experience is not a straightforward, effortless task. While phenomenologists hold ‘experience’ closely, the difficulty “is that we can only experience our own life, what is received by our own consciousness. We can never know completely another’s experiences, even though we have many clues and make inferences all the time” (Bruner, 1986, p. 5). Rather, the solution is to

recognize the intersubjective articulation of experience, which has a “beginning and an ending and thus becomes transformed into *an expression*.” (Bruner, 1986, p. 6, emphasis added).

2.1.2.1.2 Interactionism concerns how we live as persons. Many useful concepts emerged from this tradition, including: shared world, intersubjectivity, interaction, community, and communication. Interactionist researchers emphasize the ability to take the role of another (Crotty, 1998) and, to do so, “exercise sufficient discipline... to ensure that it is indeed the actors’ meanings that are recorded” (Mitchell, 1977, p. 116). This necessitates researchers adopt a culturally relevant perspective: to see culture as “irreducible and incomparable” (Crotty, 1998, p. 76; Madden, 2010). However familiar social settings are to researchers, they must treat situations as anthropologically strange (Hammersley, 1985).

2.1.2.2 Critical traditions. Social constructionism and the phenomenological tradition tend to foster the critical spirit (Crotty, 1998); but to do so, researchers must grapple with *reification* (i.e., to treat something as real that is not real), *sedimentation* (i.e., theoretical deposits layered upon one another), and the tyranny of the familiar (Crotty, 1998). A familiar set of meanings “exist to serve hegemonic interest” (Crotty, 1998, p. 59) and resist moving toward greater equality. Critical qualitative research is concerned with representation and construction: language tells particular stories about concrete (e.g., a microphone) and abstract (e.g., sexual identity) research objects. Language gives shape to certain social realities – it creates rather than reflects reality (Braun & Clarke, 2013). At times, texts must be deconstructed and interrogated for hidden assumptions/contradictions. One line of critical inquiry that resolutely upholds this position, and which has clear connections to a study of women’s lives, is feminist research.

2.1.2.2.1 Feminism. Sexism permeates the very fabric of society and the culture that sustains it (Crotty, 1998). Feminist voices, “after centuries of andocentric din” (Lugones &

Spelman, 1983, p. 574), have made a collective commitment to undermine oppressive gender-based power relations (Crotty, 1998). For this project, my feminist framework is rooted in political philosophy (e.g., Lugones, 2003; Jaggar, 1989), which aims to better comprehend and understand liberatory possibilities and to detail and illuminate resistance to intertwined oppressions. Thus, my research operates from the perspective that a ‘reading’ of resistance is essential to recognize the realities of the oppressed (Lugones, 2003). By surpassing conventional descriptions, this theoretical perspective is ethically significant, as it does not obscure the realities of subordinate people (Jaggar, 1989).

2.1.2.2 Intersectionality. When Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* in 1989, she put into motion a new form of critical inquiry. In its focus on the meaning of multiple categories of identity, intersectional research promises to address complex feminist issues (Cole, 2009; Olesen, 2011). A key tenet of intersectionality is that categories are not additive, but interactive and mutually constructed (Bowleg, 2008). The completeness of any construct can be challenged (e.g., sexuality is no longer merely ‘gay’ or ‘straight’: Olesen, 2011). For example, Cole (2009) opines that the category ‘sexual minority’ has little meaning independent from gender: she states, “To focus on a single dimension in the service of parsimony is a kind of false economy” (p. 179). Accordingly, it is critical to embrace “poignant and complex narratives about the intersections of ethnicity, sex/gender, and sexual orientation” (Bowleg, 2008, p. 314). An intersectional framework makes a substantial contribution to researchers’ methodological toolbox (Bowleg, 2008) as feminist scholars strive to understand women and non-binary people in all their plurality.

2.2 Methodology

The diverse, yet compatible, philosophical underpinnings of my project lead to my methodology – a researcher’s strategy and process/design lying behind the choice of particular methods (Crotty, 1998). My main methodology – *critical phenomenology* – works in tandem with an ethnographic method to help penetrate the poet’s lifeworld.

2.2.1 Critical Phenomenology

Phenomenological research seeks to capture the essence of a somewhat homogenous sample of participants’ lived experience (Groenewald, 2004). Emphasis is placed on participants’ first-hand accounts; to the phenomenologist, a participant’s description of what something was like is an excellent source of data (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Ideally, a ‘thick’ dimension of experience (Geertz, 1973) is grasped through interactive research methods, such as one-on-one interviews. The purpose is to enter others’ perspectives; therefore, it begins with the assumption that these perspectives are meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit (Patton, 2002).

However, this approach is thoroughly social constructionist – description and narration are not seen as straightforward representations of reality (Crotty, 1998) but, rather, as meaningfully constructed in a particular historical and cultural context. There is an inherent difficulty in directly accessing another’s experience; thus, to be more precise, we access what people “lived through *and interpreted*” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008, p. 32, emphasis added). A double hermeneutic or two-way interpretation process is implied because social scientists come to study a topic with a particular horizon (as do our participants) (Crotty, 1998).

Critical phenomenology combines an ‘empathic hermeneutics’ (i.e., ‘insider stance’) with a ‘questioning hermeneutics’ (i.e., ‘outsider stance’). The latter leads researchers to ask: ‘What is the person trying to achieve here?’, ‘Is something leaking out that wasn’t intended?’, and, ‘Do I have a sense of something going on that the participants are less aware of?’ (Smith & Osborn,

2008, pp. 53-54). Following both lines of inquiry does greater justice to the “totality of the person, ‘warts and all’” (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 54). Thus, this “fresh look at a phenomenon” (Crotty, 1998, p. 82) can go beneath the surface into deep-structure analysis.

This approach provides a meeting ground for the critical and the interpretive, allowing researchers to pose questions not yet adequately addressed (Good, 1994). Crucially, critical phenomenology can credit participants for their creative ways of resisting systems of power and control without misattributing them as forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Good, 1994).

2.2.2 *Ethnography*

Interactionism links to ethnography – another framework which influenced my doctoral research. Ethnography is the study of culture from within: researchers submerge themselves into a group and study cultural processes as they manifest (A. Johnson, 2009). Ethnographers emphasize rapport-building (Madden, 2010) as they have historically looked to groups of which they are not a part. These exotic and subordinate groups became raw material for a theory or discourse, but a new generation of ethnographers (e.g., feminist) do not “stand wholly apart from the subculture, examining it with an expert’s gaze” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 163).

Being a poet is more than a technical achievement (Craig, 2006); therefore, to miss the interactive social role process might render a less “reliable portrait, argument or theory, about ‘them, the participants’” (Madden, 2010, p. 23). Given this research embraces criticality, I investigate and deconstruct systems of power and control (Crotty, 1998). This requires me to look beneath the surface, disrupt the status quo, and unsettle taken for granted assumptions, as doing so may lead to emancipatory knowledge and discourses of social justice (Madison, 2012).

With my governing strategies of research in place, I now link the methodologies to my methods – the techniques and procedures I used to gather and analyze data (Crotty, 1998). This section includes: a) frame of reference (e.g., participants); b) techniques and instruments (e.g., interview strategies); and c) analytic strategies (e.g., thematic development).

2.2.3 Frame of Reference

2.2.3.1 Participants. The frame of reference concerns the ‘who’ aspect of research; namely, the participants. Eligibility criteria for the interview portion of my study were as follows: a) English-speaking (as the primary researcher, I am not equipped in another tongue); b) over the age of 18; c) self-identifying as non-heterosexual (i.e., lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual, etc.) and d) woman-identified or non-binary (including transgender, agender, transfeminine, transmasculine, etc.). Finally, prospective participants had to have competed in slam competitions, preferably more than a handful of times.

2.2.3.1.1 Sample size⁶. Following ethics approval, I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with 20 spoken word poets. Poets were between the ages of 18 and 43 ($\mu = 26.85$) and woman-identified ($n = 11$) or non-binary ($n = 9$) at the time of interview. Some non-binary poets identified, more specifically, as transfeminine ($n = 2$), transmasculine ($n = 1$), or transgender ($n = 1$). Nearly all participants identified as queer, including non-mutually exclusive identification as bisexual ($n = 4$), pansexual ($n = 6$), ‘lesbian-ish’ ($n = 1$), and ‘tbd/questioning’ ($n = 1$) at the time of interview. In terms of their ethno-racial status, a majority of participants identified as white (i.e., $n = 15$). The other 25% identified as Black ($n = 2$), Latina/Latinx ($n = 2$), and Asian ($n = 1$). Poets belonged to various spoken word and slam poetry ‘scenes’ across Western Canada, including those out of Saskatoon, Edmonton, Kitchener-Waterloo, Toronto, Winnipeg, Guelph, Vancouver, and Victoria.

Interviews occurred face-to-face in late 2016 and early 2017 in a variety of settings, including: university lab ($n = 1$), coffee shop ($n = 8$), restaurant ($n = 4$), pub ($n = 3$), poet's living room ($n = 1$), airport ($n = 1$), and hotel lobby ($n = 2$). Data were collected during three research intervals, which were structured around my fieldwork. Interval #1 occurred in late October and centered on the 2016 Canadian Festival of Spoken Word (CFSW), which was located in Winnipeg, Manitoba. My attendance at this national poetry festival was a fulcrum point in data collection, as I networked with poets from all over the country and immersed myself further into the community. For Interval #2 (late November/early December 2016) and #3 (early to mid-March 2017), I travelled to Southwestern Ontario and Vancouver (as well as the Winnipeg and Edmonton Airport), respectively, to conduct interviews and attend spoken word poetry events. Travel to these cities was strategic as they house many flourishing spoken word communities, and well-known queer artists and initiatives.

In Interval #1, I attended seven spoken word events and conducted five interviews (two in Saskatoon, three in Winnipeg). In Interval #2, I attended two spoken word events (including 'Hot Damn it's a Queer Slam'; <http://www.queerslam.com>) and conducted seven interviews (four in Toronto, two in Guelph, one in Kitchener-Waterloo). Finally, in Interval #3, I attended two events and conducted eight interviews (one in Winnipeg, one in Edmonton, five in Vancouver, and one in Saskatoon). Tape-recorded interviews lasted between 45 and one hundred fifty-seven minutes ($\mu = 94.55$).

I terminated data collection in early 2017 as I had reached my target sample size (i.e., 18 to 25). While there were other eligible artists to interview, it was apparent the data were high quality (i.e., rich and detailed) and I wanted to avoid drowning in data during the analysis portion of my research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). (Note: if eligible poets had requested an interview

during data collection or shortly after termination, I certainly would have complied). Though participant recruitment can be a challenge, particularly when drawing specific parameters on eligibility, I was able to reap the benefits of a large (qualitatively speaking) sample of ‘unusual suspects’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Participants were generally content, even eager, to be interviewed. This desired outcome (i.e., reaching my target sample size in a relatively short time frame) was, in part, a testament to the research strategies and techniques I employed (e.g., my overall immersion in the scene) and, in part, due to the youthfulness, diversity, and general leftist politics of the spoken word scene (see Introduction). Before data collection, I had estimated, based on observation, that approximately 40% of women spoken word poets in Canada were queer-identified; however, some of my participants suggested the number is much higher (see Theme 1, Subtheme 1).

2.2.3.1.2 Recruitment strategy. My recruitment strategy relied on two sampling techniques: purposive (i.e., selecting participants based on shared characteristics or experiences) and snowball (i.e., drawing on participants’ and researcher networks) (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I began interviews in Saskatoon with a suitable local (i.e., an eligible poet who is knowledgeable about qualitative research) in order to iron out any unforeseen details/issues (i.e., gain feedback on question construction, execution, and the interview in general). This ‘pilot’ interview was included in the end dataset as the semi-structured guide, and conversation overall, proved effective. From here, I requested poets’ participation face-to-face at a slam or spoken word poetry event or I sent them electronic messages (through Facebook). In some cases, participants requested and organized eligible poets for me to interview. I travelled to cities (i.e., Vancouver, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Toronto, Kitchener-Waterloo, and Guelph) that appeared to have

participants interested in face-to-face interviews, in order to utilize this personal (i.e., intimate) and reliable (technologically-speaking) method (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

There was no deception involved in my study. When I approached/contacted poets, I was upfront about: a) my position as a PhD student and spoken word attendee; b) the general topic of research; and c) how I obtained their contact information. I framed the invitation in a way that tactically drew on their “personal stake in the topic” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 81), by, for example, pointing to the paucity of research on queer spoken word artists, and that this research allowed their voice to be heard. I did not offer remuneration; however, if available, I purchased participants’ ($n = 13$) ‘merch’ (e.g., chapbooks, postcards, bookmarks) and paid for any food and refreshments (e.g., see Ali, 2012) in instances where we met at a restaurant, pub, or coffee shop.

2.2.4 Techniques and Instruments

This section expands on the procedural aspects of my research. I gathered data through three major modes, listed in order of import: a) one-on-one semi-structured interviews; b) ethnographic field notes; and c) supplementary textual data. Collecting data through multiple methods can open up a complex and in-depth understanding of the issue under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

2.2.4.1 One-on-one semi-structured interviews. Through emphasis on semi-structured interview, I was able to gain a detailed focus on the lives of individuals outside the particular research context (Wilkinson, 2008). Prior to conducting the interviews, I prepared a list of carefully crafted questions, leaving scope for participants to raise unanticipated issues (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants were given creative license and freedom of expression; that is, “asymmetrical turn taking” (Madden, 2010, p. 73) emphasized the poets’ narrative as the core of the dialogue.

The “specific interview situation, the needs of the interviewee, and the personal style of the interviewer” (Patton, 2002, p. 379) coalesce to create unique terrain for each interview and, thus, reflexivity is key. For instance, my propensity for animated (i.e., quick-paced, loud, passionate) discussion was used on an ad hoc basis, depending on the tone set by the interviewee. The power dynamics in one-on-one interviews between ‘the researcher’ and ‘the researched’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Roulston, 2010) should also be considered; however, this imbalance was tempered by my status as a young graduate student (i.e., 29- and 30-years-old during data collection) who lacked the gumption to perform poetry. Moreover, numerous spoken word artists are also academically-inclined with higher education (recall the aforesaid ‘insider’ scholars).

2.2.4.1.1 Consent, demographic, and debriefing form. Prior to the interview, discussants were asked to complete two copies of a standard consent form (see Appendix B) and a short, seven-question demographic form. Questions on the latter were open-ended with plenty of space and asked participants about their: a) gender identity and preferred pronouns; b) sexual orientation/identity; c) age; d) religion; e) race and/or ethnicity; f) occupation(s)/place(s) of employment; and, g) pseudonym, if preferred⁷. At the end of interview, I provided participants with a standard debriefing form (see Appendix C).

2.2.4.1.2 Semi-structured interview guide. I consulted Smith and Osborn’s (2008) guide to question construction and ordering to build a semi-structured interview guide containing three sections: spoken word poetry, identity, and coming out on stage (see Appendix D). A funneling technique was used: earlier questioning was general and focused on artistic history and spoken word community; later questioning covered more specific and ‘sensitive’ issues, regarding sexuality and disclosing various identities. Probes were “purposely ambiguous” (Levy & Hollan, 1998, p. 337) and prompts were used for clarification.

With the goal “to facilitate interaction in which participants are forthcoming” (Roulston, 2010), questions were open-ended, non-leading, singular, short; clear and precise; linguistically appropriate; non-assumptive; and empathic (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Interview questions from previous studies that centered on the nature of spoken word poetry (e.g., ‘What makes a good poem?’; Rivera, 2013), were substituted for those more phenomenological; that is, tailored to the lifeworld of a particular demographic (e.g., ‘How do you express your queer identity through your poetry?’). I had mostly memorized the interview guide beforehand, which aided a ‘natural’ exchange (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As is customary in qualitative research, upon consent, the interview was tape recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

2.2.4.2 Participant observation and ethnographic field notes. Interviews alone are often an insufficient form of data to study social life (Roulston, 2010); and this study offered up the fortunate circumstance to utilize an ethnographic method. By capturing participants’ milieu, fieldwork can open up a fruitful terrain with compelling ecological validity. With my research questions in mind, particularly those not wholly answered through one-on-one interviews (e.g., how does *spatiality* [poets’ *embodiment* and the *atmosphere*] affect their lived experience?), I treated field notes like a free-hand research journal since doing so can lead to “a richer, more thoughtful, complex analysis, informed by a reflexive position” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 71).

Participant observation was actor-oriented (Geertz, 1973). As public performance brings live bodies in space, the ethnographic eye should be fixed on “who’s in the audience creating community” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 9) as well as the poets. My observations implied moderate participation (Dewalt, Dewalt, & Wayland, 1998) because I did not actively seek interaction. However, the ethnographer’s body is a real body, and, as such, intersubjective embodiment was scrutinized in order to maintain reflexivity (Madden, 2010). For example, I considered the

inherent power gradient between observer-observed (i.e., high to low). However, I epitomized the spoken word attendee laid out by Somers-Willett (2005) – white, middle-class, under 35 – so I ‘blended in’ with some ease.

2.2.4.3 Supplementary textual data. Finally, the textual data gathered included: a) YouTube / video spoken word performances; b) poets’ merchandise (most often chapbooks); and c) website information, such as mission statements, Facebook event invites, bios, and promotional materials. I collected these ‘secondary sources’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013) in order to familiarize myself with the ‘languaculture’ (Patton, 2002) and to build rapport with my participants. Furthermore, queer temporary artifacts (e.g., zines, posters, guerilla art) are a culturally relevant repository and a record of queer activity (Halberstam, 2005) that can play an essential role in research. During the one-on-one interview, we discussed a preselected poem of the poet’s creation (see Question # 24 in Appendix D). When locating this work was a challenge, I asked the participant to send me a recorded or typed version prior to the interview.

2.2.5 Analytic Strategies

Finally, I analyzed the data. Raw data (e.g., audio transcripts) retain the messiness of real life (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Since “qualitative inquiry is rife with ambiguity” (Patton, 2002, p. 242), I aimed to capture the messy aspects of socio-psychological phenomena. To provide a thick description, which is a hallmark of qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013), is to understand a people’s culture by exposing its normality without reducing its particularity (Geertz, 1973).

In my previous research (i.e., Nielsen & Alderson, 2014), professors’ words were given primary importance (i.e., little interpretation occurred while description was emphasized), but my present research endeavored to be more critical; that is, I interrogated the stories I collected (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A critical analysis can render explicit the social and political meanings

covertly articulated in language and action (Good, 1994). Understanding narratives as texts allowed for a focus on the subtleties of language (e.g., rhetorical devices, metaphor, tropes, and syntax) (Todorov, 1981) and patterns of meanings that fruitfully linked to broader psychological, social, or theoretical concerns (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

2.2.5.1 Theoretical thematic analysis. Data were analyzed using a flexible approach to extracting themes put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013). Although researcher judgment is necessary to determine a theme, a convincing theme should occur in a number of instances across the data set (i.e., *pattern*-based analysis). Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six steps for conducting a thematic analysis: a) becoming familiar with the data; b) creating initial codes; c) searching for themes; d) reviewing derived themes; e) defining themes and giving each a name; and f) writing up the results. I used a specific variety called ‘theoretical thematic analysis,’ which emphasizes theoretical concepts and researcher standpoint (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

During step a), I (re)read all transcribed and printed interviews. As the primary researcher who collected and transcribed all of the data, I was already deeply familiar it. I used a computer software program and foot-controlled hardware with pause, play, and rewind functions, which sufficiently aided the transcription process. Orthographic/verbatim transcription involves recording the spoken words and other linguistic utterances in audio data with a specific notation system applied consistently across transcripts (See Appendix E). To preserve the messiness of speech (compared to writing), I recorded pauses and intonation; varied pace and volume; etc. Once completed, I widened the margins in order to provide ample space for coding. Each line was numbered for data collation (i.e., code and extract retrieval and organization).

During step b), I manually coded the entire dataset. A code is a brief word or phrase that captures the essence of what a bit of data (can be from one to around 20 lines) means (Braun &

Clarke, 2013). Earlier, surface-level coding was made in the left-hand margin, which was based on ‘data-driven’ or semantic codes; later, deeper-structure analysis was made in the right-hand margin, which contained more ‘researcher-derived’ or latent codes. I then collated all instances of codes in the dataset in a three-column file, which included: 1) the code; 2) the data number (i.e., participant) and line number(s); and, 3) the extract. Similar codes with “fine grain distinctions between them” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 216) were collated in one place.

In step c), I shifted focus to larger patterns across the dataset; in short, I clustered codes together, which inductively create candidate themes. This clustering was often based on semantics (e.g., negative talk about slam) but others were informed by theoretical orientation (e.g., spoken word as a ‘ritual of affliction’). To aid this pattern identification, I printed out all codes and manually cut them into small pieces of paper. I placed them alongside one another based on similarity and considered their relationship to one another (i.e., lateral or hierarchical). Some codes were similar enough that they collapsed into one, but for others, I wanted to preserve the nuanced differences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This process was highly iterative, as I consistently referred back to the data to ensure a ‘grounded’ analysis. If codes did not have a clear fit in the developing analysis, I placed them into a ‘miscellaneous’ category. I then situated code clusters near other code clusters based on a provisional connection between them. For example, a candidate theme on spoken word as a ‘queer bubble’ was placed near a candidate theme called ‘coming out never neutral,’ as they shared some conceptual meeting ground, and worked in tandem to tell a ‘story’ about the participants as vocally ‘out’ artists. Finally, I referred back to my governing research questions to determine if and how the developing analyses addressed my queries, at which point I further refined the thematic map (by about 50%) in order to produce a parsimonious and coherent analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

By step d), I had a provisional thematic map based on this clustering of codes into candidate themes. Themes capture something important about the data in relation to the research question and have a patterned meaning within the dataset. Themes have a hierarchical structure, based on three levels: overarching, themes, and sub-themes. *Overarching themes* organize the analysis, and some *themes* require *subthemes* in order to capture specific aspects of a theme.

With ‘visual thematic mapping’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013) in place, for step e), I defined each theme by sketching its boundaries and clearly pointing to its ‘central organizing concept’ which unifies the data extracts (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I gave themes “evocative, catchy, concise and informative” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 258) names. Finally, as a means of quality control, I consulted and compared my ethnographic fieldnotes to my developing analysis.

In step f), I wrote up the results and deepened my analysis with literature and theory. This stage required me to situate the findings vis-à-vis previous research in the area, with the aim of contributing to, developing, or challenging prior understandings. To create a compelling and rich research ‘story’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013), I carefully interweaved my voice as a researcher in with the participants’ (Olesen, 2011). I also very lightly ‘cleaned up’ the extracts at this stage (Braun & Clarke, 2013). While all overarching themes, themes, and subthemes required my analytic efforts toward meaning-making, some findings necessitated the critical spirit (Crotty, 1998) underpinning this research. This oscillation between critical and descriptive helped to convey a sophisticated interpretation which entered the heart of the phenomenon at hand (Geertz, 1973). These research findings will be explored over the course of the following four chapters.

Chapter 3: Overarching Theme 1

Outspoken, the overarching theme of this analysis, relates to all other conceptual findings and captures the essence of the data in relation to the research questions. This polysemic term succinctly depicts the interviewees' lifeworld as 'out' (i.e., as queer and/or non-binary) 'spoken' (i.e., poetic orators) and outspoken (i.e., the tendency to make frank and provocative statements). To be *Outspoken* was a "visible action" and "very conscious choice" (Poet 13), and, in a world where queer self-disclosures continue to hold much relevancy (Nielsen & Alderson, 2014), poets' proclivities to "say it loudly, and say it in front of people" (Poet 13) is crucial. Poets' capacity and willingness to perform, for instance, a "vocally ultra-queer poem" (Poet 1) in spoken word space suggests this research tapped into a phenomenologically significant and culturally nuanced experience. While slam poets are known for "outspoken political critique" (de Bruijn & Oudenhuijsen, 2021, p. 749), the current research builds upon a small literature that aligns *queer* spoken word with an "opportunity for counterhegemonic struggle" and "an articulation of marginalized existence" (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 75).

Briefly, *Outspoken* contains three themes (i.e., 'queer counter-public,' 'queer omnipresence,' and 'queer affliction'), each with three subthemes. Theme 1 emphasizes the social-cultural-political-historical landscape of 'queer' as both an identity marker (i.e., gender, sexuality) and ethos (i.e., inherently subversive), which greatly influenced poets' lives at the local level. The 'convergences' (Subtheme 1) of queer-identified artists and queer-specific initiatives at spoken word made for an exceptional location for poets to express, nurture, and magnify their queer artistic expressions. As poets used spoken word space to deconstruct dominant ideologies and contest hegemonic structures, their 'rhetoric' (Subtheme 2) aligned with that of counter-public theory. However, a deeper analysis revealed specific 'quandaries'

(Subtheme 3) of the queer counter-public, which stemmed from a parochial outlook and a perceived saturation of queer voices. Next, poets' 'queer omnipresence' (Theme 2) in spoken word space led to 'explorations' (Subtheme 4) of identities (e.g., to come out, hone their identities, and decorate their experiences in an unfettered and nuanced fashion). Moreover, spoken word was cast as an unparalleled arena to explore and express the unique 'liminalities' (Subtheme 5) associated with queer existence. However, poets also faced particular 'constraints' (Subtheme 6) from queer omnipresence, for example, being pigeonholed or vulnerable to homo- and transnegativity. Finally, the therapeutic aspects of spoken word are discussed in 'queer affliction' (Theme 3). Spoken word helped poets alleviate suffering, angst, and confusion, which likens the artistic ritual to a form of 'catharsis' (Subtheme 7). A discourse on 'trauma sharing' (Subtheme 8) also emerged, which signals the complex ways queer spoken word artists publicly 'shared' their trauma on stage. Interestingly, audience members were said to 'feed' off queer trauma, a phenomenon that can be read as a form of 'painfotainment' (Subtheme 9). (See Appendix F for a visual thematic map of all overarching themes, themes, and subthemes.)

Outspoken

How did the spoken word poets interviewed for this research conceptualize their gender and sexuality vis-à-vis their artistic experiences? Why did interviewees choose to 'come out' on stage? To begin, *Outspoken* was tethered to a discourse of authenticity. Poet 19, for example, said they prioritized "being incredibly authentic and bringing my identities as a human to stage." Such vocal acknowledgements of queerness could generate feelings of comfort, as this 'act of authenticity' (Nielsen & Alderson, 2014) concretely affirmed poets' identities: "speaking about my queer identity on stage is important to me because, yeah, I feel most comfortable about myself when I'm outwardly most authentic" (Poet 2). Phenomenologically speaking, relations

with others (i.e., intersubjectivity) were deeply relevant to poets' notions of authenticity (Ashworth, 2015): "the advantage is people hear it. So, that's the big one. It's also like authenticity, is important. Right? You don't want to feel like you're hiding something. Right, that sucks" (Poet 20). Another interviewee invoked a culturally relevant closet metaphor to elucidate the intersubjective aspects of authenticity: "saying it out loud to a bunch of people and like reaffirming like, yes, this is who you are. It's not just a diary entry and like hidden in your room" (Poet 12). Notions of authenticity emerged as the core finding in a previous qualitative inquiry into professors' experiences with self-disclosing their queer identities in the classroom (see Nielsen & Alderson, 2014), which suggests there may be a reliable interconnection between the two concepts (i.e., self-disclosure and perceived authenticity).

Relatedly, participants championed *Outspoken* expression as a means to connect with other queer people: "I want to reach those—reach my people, right!" (Poet 6). While an opportunity to self-disclose could arise in other ways (e.g., through conversation), *Outspoken* stage expression could expedite or streamline the process: "It's also like a great way to figure out where the other queer women in the room are. Just go up and be like, I'm going read a really queer poem, and everyone will like come together afterwards" (Poet 2).

It's been very helpful for building community with other queer people, especially queer people of colour, or like queer migrants to just like sit and talk about that experience in ways that I wouldn't have been able to have that conversation if one of us doesn't disclose. (Poet 7)

These narratives draw on the temporal utility of spoken word and slam poetry (i.e., three minutes per poem) to forge queer solidarity with those who have shared identities or experiences.

How did *Outspoken* stage expressions manifest and unfold? Did poets typically regard their artistic work as “really queer” (Poet 2) or “vocally ultra-queer” (Poet 1), or were there exceptions to such explicit messaging? Evidently, queer expressions were as diverse as the people that performed them. Some were blatant: “A lot of them are very obvious, right. Very about me being queer very physically, vocally out” (Poet 2). To convey this idea, one poet “unapologetically” expressed their queer identity on stage, as they put it: “with a pride that I didn’t have before” (Poet 6). Here, the emotion of pride related to the poet’s commitment and pursuance of *Outspoken* expression as a ‘personal project’ (Ashworth, 2015). This discourse draws on queer epistemologies from modern Western culture (Sedgwick, 1990), as poets strived toward a “shameless existence” (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 84) via the unapologetic display of counterhegemonic identities. Evidently, for some poets, spoken word provided an unprecedented platform: “When I’m in the poetry community it’s a lot less subtle, it’s direct” (Poet 13).

Conversely, *Outspoken* expressions could appear more concealed or abstract with “a splash of queer here, splash of queer here” (Poet 10). Utilizing their “bad ass superpowers” (Poet 11), numerous poets voiced a desire to broach controversial topics in a strategic fashion: “I try to be very careful in my poetry, um, where I think that the most successful activism actually makes people uncomfortable but not alienated” (Poet 1). Poets used bottom-up commentary (de Bruijn & Oudenhuijsen, 2021) “to deliver a message that people can digest” (Poet 11): “I think that being political and choosing to stir shit up is important, and making people think it’s more important than actively, ‘I’m trying to be political with this piece’” (Poet 3). For example, one poet used “humour as an access point. To sort of drop people into a story and then talk about, like, a bigger, a bigger thing” (Poet 19). Specifically, Poet 19 used spoken word to reflect and comment on their gender alterity, as they said of the poem: it’s “sort of about weird things that

kids say to me, but then it ends up being about gender” (Poet 19). Subtler artistic expressions could be used, in a tactical way, to gain queer visibility, and, as such, made a substantial contribution to poets’ artistic toolbox: “Even in poems that aren’t about my queerness. It’s background in how I choose to [perform?] it” (Poet 9). These narratives speak to spoken word poets’ efforts to ‘normalize’ queer topics or aspects of existence toward a healthy pluralism (Yardley, 2000): “To just, [said?]. And move on. And it’s not. Sometimes it is the focus. Sometimes it’s not the focus” (Poet 10).

Furthermore, poets touted *Outspoken* performances as a manoeuvre to help build their self-confidence: “I think when I’m on stage and I’m doing queer poetry I don’t even know if it’s a conscious thing but I just am confident and I try to show people that” (Poet 4). Participants emphasized the power of spoken word, for example, to proclaim queer love and desire on stage: “And then in finding spoken word, and being able to express. I can write a poem about how much I love this woman and stand here as a woman and say so” (Poet 11). “I have one poem, ‘an ode to the woman I will one day love’” (Poet 2). In Poet 3’s account of performing a spoken word poem with a romantic partner, their physical and emotional proximity to their partner as an object of desire helped to communicate a queer orientation (Ahmed, 2006):

I’m really gay for you, I want all the world to know. So, she reluctantly said yes. And we did it, and everyone loved it. It was a cute little, light-hearted piece about just like being gay, it was really sweet. (Poet 3)

Interestingly, this cheerful description (i.e., “cute little, light-hearted piece”) contrasts with the archetype of identity-based spoken word poems as highly political and full of affect (Somers-Willett, 2005) but deep personal reflections on queer love relationships remained:

Writing poems about my girlfriend and what our love looks like. And just what it's been for me. And. Just like the things that we've experienced together. And the love that we've grown. It's just been very different for me. Cuz, again, like I said poetry is like this thing that I used to say what I couldn't say. (Poet 12)

This passage evidences Poet 12's capacity to extend queer desire through *Outspoken* stage expression. Further, she credited spoken word as her sole vehicle to publicly discuss her lived experience as queer and, as such, its worth as a means of queer self-expression was pivotal. Hence, this 'extension' of queer desire was not only a social experience, but also a spatial one that had potential to shape "bodies and worlds" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 102).

Relatedly, spoken word was seen as a rare and treasured place to tackle experiences of homo- and transnegativity: "Moving forward with, you know, being trans and coming to terms with, transphobia" ... "This is the place where I can talk about it and I can feel connected. And so, being able to talk about it has allowed me to feel good about it." (Poet 15). Drawing on the local idiom of 'speaking one's truth,' Poet 4 connected *Outspoken* stage expression to anti-oppression: "We're told to be silent everywhere else in the world and spoken word is the time where you have to speak your truth" (Poet 4). Poets also could experience the salutary effects of being *Outspoken* in this coveted space when *outside* the spoken word sphere:

I find there's been quite a few poets who've done queer slam and who've never been out as queer on stage and then they're like, 'Oh this is, this is where I can do this' and then they've gone on to be very out about being queer in their life and careers. (Poet 6)

How did poets use the spoken word stage as a launching pad to a more *Outspoken* existence? In a basic sense, when poets encountered people who had witnessed their *Outspoken* performances in their day-to-day life, it enabled them a more secure (i.e., "very out") existence:

“They all know that I’m queer. Because of my performances. And so all of a sudden, I have this, like, five humans in allyship, which know that I’m queer in the hetero space. So it’s like opening” (Poet 10). Poet 10, a veteran poet in the scene, quantified this sense of “opening” by stating that “literally hundreds” of people had seen her “queer expression.” Here again, the spatial fraction of the poet’s lifeworld was crucial, as the physical and emotional ‘geography’ of spoken word poetry granted the poet possibilities (Ashworth, 2015), both within spoken word subculture and beyond.

Incidentally, *Outspoken* stage expression was seen as a highly effective way to counter identity invisibilities. For example, femme poets who had experiences of ‘passing’ (i.e., being read as straight) utilized this tactic to authenticate their identities as queer, bisexual, or pansexual: “A lot of the time I feel a bit of an unconscious need to out myself on the stage because I know that my sexuality is always somewhat invisible” (Poet 2). “Before I really figured out how to like, come out on stage, it was just more annoying when people didn’t realize that I was queer. And I was like, oh, I actually have to be more explicit about this” (Poet 17). This impulse reflects an established scholarship on the cultural invisibilities of queer women (see Blair & Hoskin, 2015; Butler, 1990; Castle, 1993). However, being ignored by mainstream institutions has fuelled a desire in members of spoken word subculture to “articulate the powerful potential of a queer femininity” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 166) and to “make poetry into the language of riot and change” (p. 169). Likewise, poets in the current study sought to redress adverse experiences of passing with *Outspoken* content: “If I write a love poem, about a guy, like I need to queer it, or else people aren’t gonna, they won’t have any inkling” (Poet 17). “[This] also contributes to why I’m as loud about my identity in my poetry as I am. Because I know often times when performing them I’m looking more like a girl” (Poet 9). This latter quote

suggests that non-binary poets could similarly use *Outspoken* stage expression to combat invisibilities associated with their gender.

Invisibility concerns tended to ignite poets' political fervour, for example when at tailored (e.g., queer-specific) events: "The RCMP were there and so it was challenging the RCMP to do better for the LGBT community" (Poet 8). Back in their local scenes, the stage could be used to 'unghost' (Nielsen, 2016) particular queer experiences. As a specific and provocative example of such "poetic activism" (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 78), Poet 16 strived to challenge prevailing cultural narratives of domestic violence as a heterosexual epidemic. Through poetry, she attempted to alert others (Schoppelrei, 2019) of the ways queer domestic violence "can exist in a much more nuanced and insidious way" (Poet 16). While some interviewees actively resisted categorization of their poetry as political – "I don't do political stuff" (Poet 5), their decision to perform of controversial topics would indicate otherwise. As Poet 16 continued, "If I'm going to write about queer issues, like that is an important issue for me."

Naturally, the stage was the prime location for poets' *Outspoken* expression, but other methods were noted. For example, some poets 'outed' themselves via their biographical profile:

If it can come up, if I'm in a space where it's like, oh you know they probably won't kill me if I say this, let me just throw it in the air! Like it's in my bio that I'm queer. (Poet 7)

The metaphor of throwing one's queer identity "in the air" connects to Poet 3's "light-hearted" manifestation noted above. These ideas communicate a carefree attitude associated with one's queerness, yet reference to the potential of queer violence maintains the gravity surrounding an *Outspoken* existence. Being *Outspoken* on stage also could necessitate 'outings' prior to a performance: "I just texted, 'By the way I'm bisexual, like just so you know, so you don't find

out while I do my poem about it” (Poet 1). As a final example, poets could come out on stage but *outside* of a poem, for example when hosting an event:

I was hosting and so I specifically said, ‘Hey just to be ultra clear, I’m trans and blah-blah-blah’ and I wasn’t always dressed feminine at that point. And it felt kind of cool. Just very sort of, not in a poem, not in the abstract way, just say. (Poet 15)

While the benefits of *Outspoken* expression were clearly evidenced, negative aspects also surfaced. For one, because *Outspoken* rituals are “something you do in front of people” (Poet 13), some poets felt burdened by the attention these expressions could garner. Distinctively, interviewees troubled the pressure “to be the queer voice” (Poet 16), and opined that: “You don’t owe that to anyone” ... “You don’t have to be a mouthpiece for anyone” (Poet 16). Use of the politically connotative term “mouthpiece” is noteworthy, as this discourse aligns with spoken word poets’ well-developed political argot. Poets also articulated the pressures they felt to live up to certain queer expectations, such as those based on gender expression:

Once you talk about gender identity then I do worry that people expect you to, ‘Oh I talked about gender identity now I have to wear dresses all the time.’ Like, I don’t! But it’s, you know, there’s that like, feeling like, if you broach the subject then you got to back it up, or you have to look a certain way. (Poet 13)

This discourse applied to sexual identity as well and, again, poets firmly resisted cultural stereotypes or expectations “to be the queer voice” (Poet 16): “I’m not going to gay it up. It’s like, this is it. I’m gay as it gets. This is everything” (Poet 7). “I’m just myself as I can be. And that’s queer enough” (Poet 6). This resoluteness regarding one’s representation of queer identity foreshadows the ways poets upheld their “alternative styles of political behavior and alternative

norms of public speech” (Fraser, 1992, p. 116), which will be explored in the following chapter (i.e., Theme 1).

What is at the root of this discourse on authenticity regarding poets’ gender and sexual identities? A resistance to being “the queer voice” stirs up a number of existential queries: Who or what was “the queer voice”? How did this voice come into circulation? And, finally, why would interviewees feel pressure to express this voice? To understand better queer spoken word poetic discourse, a probing of the recitation situation alone is insufficient; thus, poets’ broader life context and their ideologies of social life (Abu-Lughod, 1986) also require scrutinizing. This probing of poets’ social, cultural, political, and historical lifeworld resulted in a theme termed: the ‘queer counter-public.’

Chapter 4: Theme 1

4.1 Queer Counter-Public

‘Queer,’ the umbrella term for all non-straight and non-normative sexualities (Ahmed, 2006), is commonly used but ambiguously defined (Hogan, 2005). It may be ambitious to claim, then, that there exists ‘queer time’ or ‘queer space’ (Halberstam, 2005), but the saliency and frequency of queer (uttered 50 times per interview; $\mu = 56.55$) in the current research suggests this malleable discourse defined poets’ relational chains and ways of life. As an identity marker (i.e., LGBTQ+) and ethos (i.e., inherently subversive), queer was used to elucidate numerous lifeworld features such as subjective embodiment, intersubjectivity, personal project, and discursiveness (Ashworth, 2008). Poets’ “involvement in their lived environment” (Ashworth, 2015, p. 20) enriched their understandings of their queer identities as well as the larger issues surrounding these positionings and experiences. Likewise, poets routinely invoked their “nexus of identity markers” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 146) or ‘intersectionality,’ which is not surprising as the academic concept has gained interest in the “mainstream media, on various media platforms, in face-to-face interactions, online communities and networks” (Guimarães Corrêa, 2020, p. 824).

Because there will “probably be more queer people” (Poet 13) inside spoken word space than outside, how might one define a collection of marginal and oppressed artists who come together to share artistic self-expression? Interviewees cast their spoken word communities not only as queer inclusive but also as having a specific focus on nurturing, magnifying, and resonating queer expressions. As seen above, the decision to bring *Outspoken* content to the stage was, at times, a strategic manoeuvre of oratorical protest (see, for example, Poet 9’s narrative on queer domestic violence). These “public rhetorical actions” (Chávez, 2011, p. 2) are central to social movements, and more specifically, counter-public theory. Counter-publics are a

relatively recent theory on the public sphere and can be defined as “alternate spaces aware of their subordinate status” (A. Johnson, 2009, p. 205) that assert difference through performance and oppositional discourse. It fits, then, that poets placed a strong emphasis on queer, as its oblique effect involves the disturbance of the order of things (Ahmed, 2006).

While participants generally applauded abundant *Outspoken* expression, some poets perceived there to be a ‘saturation’ of queer voices in the local and national spoken word poetry scene. In A. Johnson’s (2009) account of spoken word as a counter-public, she warned that dominant ideologies could swiftly seep into counter-publics. This critique was reflected in the current research as ‘parochial’ (Tomaney, 2012) aspects of spoken word led some poets to deem this intersubjective arena an ineffectual, and potentially detrimental, echo chamber. These assertions line up with A. Johnson’s (2009, p. 216) critical reading that there is “no real counter-public or public spaces; they are both intertwined, and at times, interdependent” and as such, both are imperfect sites for resistance and freedom. These ideas, and more, will be discussed under the subtheme of ‘quandaries,’ but first, ideas of the ‘queer counter-public’ as a site for queer ‘convergences’ and queer ‘rhetoric’ will be established.

4.1.1 Subtheme 1: Convergences

My observation of unabashed queer expressions in the Canadian spoken word scene inspired this research; however, in what ways did participants view their communities as “spaces of withdrawal and regroupment” (Fraser, 1992, p. 124)? Were they surrounded by other *Outspoken* artists who used these spaces as “bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (Fraser, 1992, p. 124)? If so, what were the cumulative effects of collective *Outspoken* expression on stage?

Predictably, a number of poets remarked: “so much of the poetry community is queer” (Poet 5). With emphasis on inclusivity, poets deemed their local scenes “very queer-accepting” (Poet 1). “A lot of our scene is queer-trans. A lot of our scene is—we’re fairly inclusive and I really like that” (Poet 3). Furthermore, poets described their local scenes as not only queer inclusive, but also as having an explicit focus on fostering the voices of queer people: “A space cultivated for women and queer people” (Poet 1). “There’s been a bunch of new people coming out, and like, young queer people, finding their voice. I’m just like, ‘Please, take the stage’” (Poet 11). Poets extended this observation to other local scenes and the broader national scene: “most scenes are pretty predominantly queer” (Poet 6). “A slam audience is generally a queer-positive space” (Poet 2). This outward encouragement of queer-identified poets and their *Outspoken* works suggests their addresses to one another at queer gatherings were “laden with intimate affect” (Ahmed, 2006; Warner, 2002, p. 87).

Overall, participants were enthusiastic to see robust queer representation in spoken word: “It’s a pretty queer scene. And there are times where like, every second poet is queer. And you’re like, ‘Fuck yes!’” (Poet 18). This preponderance led some interviewees to speculate on the number of queer-identified poets involved: “The best poets in Canada, like over half of them are queer people” (Poet 4). More specifically, a rather large proportion of queer-identified women was observed: “Somebody was trying to figure out, like ah, how many ciswomen are in the scene who aren’t queer and I think we only came up with one name” (Poet 6). Suffice to say, participants felt less like a sexual *minority* when in the spoken word milieu, which, ironically, could also lead to invisibilities. For example, one interviewee described an experience in which another poet “forgot” she was queer: “‘Yeah, wow, there’s so many queer people’ and people would be like, ‘Oh yeah right, you’re queer, like I totally forgot’” (Poet 7).

How did efforts toward inclusivity and nurturing queer expression affect interviewees' experiences? One poet credited the inclusive "culture in slam" for her willingness to bring *Outspoken* material to the stage: "Coming out on stage isn't that scary for me. Um. Yeah I feel very safe and protected in those spaces" (Poet 17). Moreover, poets benefited from the chance to "figure it out with maybe other people who are trying to figure it out too" (Poet 12); that is, they scrutinized their identities and experiences alongside others in this purportedly safe environment. The 'convergence' of both hearing *and* writing/saying *Outspoken* artistic work had salutary effects: "I had a lot of figuring out to do later than a lot of people. So like, meeting all those people and being a part of the community helped a lot with that. Writing a lot of identity things" (Poet 18). Thus, poets' internal 'concerns' entailed interpersonal relationships, as poets depended on others to acknowledge and confirm their identity claims (Ashworth, 2015). Crucially, some poets considered spoken word the primary or sole place to explore queer aspects of themselves: "This would be the only place that I could be myself. And, um, slowly, slowly been able to experiment with that. This has been a safe community to do that in" (Poet 15). "It was one of the first places where I could start exploring that. Outside of, like, gay bars or anything so it was one of those things where you could kind of experiment with that a little more" (Poet 13).

Furthermore, most poets had performed in "queer spaces, and spaces where, um, there's a dedicated topic" (Poet 3), wherein queer expressions were even more plentiful and unencumbered than a standard open mic or slam: "You're like around a bunch of other queer people and you're like 'Heck yeah queer poems!'" (Poet 1). This dedicated focus created a commanding resonance for interviewees: "They were some of the most powerful things that I experienced. Because you have a whole room full of queer people, together, all feeding off that energy of 'Hey, I understand you'" (Poet 15). Through attending tailored events, participants

learned “to appreciate queer space and the significance of queer space” (Poet 6) as a platform to foster *Outspoken* expression. “Whenever I’ve done specific performances at, like, queer events, you know, I just feel, like, I can just I stand up there, like, so open, and soooo, like, I will pour myself onto that stage” (Poet 19).

I felt even more comfortable at the queer slam. Like, that was specifically a room full of queer people there for that purpose of just safe [accepting?]. So I felt, yeah, I felt a little bit freer in that space. (Poet 11)

That interviewees felt “freer” and more “open” to express (or “pour”) themselves in queer spoken word is key to this lived experience. Indeed, the social and spatial importance of queer spoken word presupposes a sense of restriction when outside the spoken word community. Poet 8, for example, also derived a sense of comfort in queer-specific space, and acknowledged that the creation of such a space required “tireless work” (Poet 1) from subcultural members:

I was the most comfortable because I was in my queer community. You know? Where the one strong thing we have in common is we exist in this place in life that is carved out because we need it more than anything.

Referencing the “need” for “carved out” space hints at “tension with and dissent from larger publics” (A. Johnson, 2009, p. 205); that is, this discourse aligns spoken word with a ‘queer counter-public,’ wherein queer identity and experience resisted hegemonic discourse:

Doing that poem to an audience full of queer people is such a different experience. And it’s-it’s-it’s really beautiful, and you realize that, like, how a general audience that may be predominantly straight doesn’t always pick up on everything, and doesn’t always fully appreciate all of the stuff that you’re doing. (Poet 2)

As the nuances of ‘queer’ could be mystifying to the dominant ear, Poet 2 is touching on the resonance she felt when performing *Outspoken* material to a predominantly queer audience. It follows, then, when *Outspoken* expressions ‘converged’ with other queer poets’ artistic manifestations, a sense of connection was identified, as poets, together, rose above “public discourse and domination” (A. Johnson, 2009, p. 206): “And I think that creates a commonality and a feeling of comfort to see other people come out. In whatever they’re talking about” (Poet 10). “It’s also connecting with other people who are having the same experience” (Poet 20).

These extracts point to the value of performing to “a big queer audience” (Poet 20). Moreover, the reciprocal benefits of *Outspoken* expressions were recognized when queer audience members expressed their gratitude for their work: “One advantage would be helping other queer people. I’ve done poems then had other queer people tell me that my words really spoke to them” (Poet 4). “If I have somebody coming up to me who also identifies as queer, it’s usually, ‘Thank you for doing that poem! And saying that out loud!’” (Poet 10). This “reciprocity of perspectives” (Ashworth, 2015, p. 26) was a powerful aspect of poets’ lived experience: “A few trans people came up to me after, and they’re just like, ‘You said exactly how I felt and la-la-la.’ You know like it was really good and we had a good time to connect with each other” (Poet 6). This sense of connection buffers previous research that interpreted spoken word poets as having mutuality (Maddalena, 2009) or a reciprocal relationship (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014) with audience members.

It follows, then, that queer begot queer in the queer counter-public. In a basic sense, the repeated action of queer people taking the stage with *Outspoken* work had cumulating effects: “The fact that there’s a couple of women and queer people who are just on stage every week, every week. Right, and that really sort of you know, brought other people in.” ... “there was a

real ripple effect, you know. Passing on the T virus” (Poet 20). This metaphor of a “ripple effect” is thematically in tune with queer ‘convergences,’ as reference to water allegorizes queer movement or congregation to enable points of connection “that are discontinuous with the straight line” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 102). Moreover, Poet 17 commended her spoken word scene for the queer resonance she had experienced as an audience member: “Because you see people expressing their experience. And if there’s someone queer on stage, saying, ‘This is how I feel. About this person. In this queer way.’ I’m, like, I relate to that. Then that’s affirmative for me” (Poet 17). Evidently, queer ways of being were “produced, validated, fleshed out, and celebrated” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 128) in these intersubjective artistic spaces.

Dominate norms may originate in bodies and speech, but they can be “redefined and transgressed” (A. Johnson, 2009, p. 206) in counter-public space. The ‘queer counter-public’ was particularly useful for those questioning their gender and/or sexuality; as being able to witness unabashed and nuanced queer expressions “might just help somebody else feel more comfortable being openly queer” (Poet 7). “If I can write something that encourages other queer people to write about their identities and figure out more about themselves then that’s the most important thing to me” (Poet 4). As evidence, poets had encouraged those who were newly out or questioning their identities to attend a spoken word event: “I invite them to the slam and then they’re like, ‘Whaaaaaat.’ Um...And especially...Like when they’re questioning themselves” (Poet 11). Overall, introductions to queer spoken word garnered a positive response: “I have had other people who are, like, either closeted or less, less open, be like, ‘Thank you for that poem,’ which is just always a beautiful, beautiful moment” (Poet 2).

Even while poets routinely brought *Outspoken* work to the stage, their identity explorations could be ongoing. For one interviewee who was reluctant/unable to identify her

sexuality on her demographics form, time spent in spoken word scene (i.e., the queer counter-public) led her to discover queer aspects of herself. Using metaphor, she described how repeated exposure to queer expressions began to awaken something inside her:

At first when I was hearing other people do poems, and like, seeing, you know, queer individuals talk about their love, and what their love looks like, and... just kind of go through their poems and... I don't know, I think deep down something in me was trying to climb out like that was like the rope. It was like slowly getting there, and getting there, and then one day it, like, finally came out and I was, like, 'Okay!' You know? It was like something I didn't know was becoming alive. (Poet 12)

This illustrative narrative speaks to many fractions of poets' lifeworld, particularly that of 'personal project' (Ashworth, 2015), as it demonstrates the ways queer spoken word artists "still need to find a place in the winding, twisting story of queer subcultural lives" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 187). The metaphor of a rope conveys the utility of spoken word poetry as queer desire became 'reachable' within the poet's bodily horizon of the social (Ahmed, 2006). Now queerly animate (i.e., "alive"), Poet 12 suggested that she could support someone else who was closeted or questioning through a similar liminal process:

It was beautiful and so I think now it's, like, that's what I think in stages, you know, like, that was a stage for me and now this is the next stage where I'm able to talk about it openly. And you know be that person maybe for someone else!

Evidently, lived experience as queer included more than sexual contact and desires: queer sociality at spoken word involved "shared struggles, common ground, and mutual aspirations" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 103). However, what did it mean to be "openly" queer? How did this queer 'convergence' "work to elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations in which gender and

sexuality can be lived, including forms of intimate associations, vocabularies of affect, styles of embodiment, erotic practices, and relations of care and pedagogy” (Warner, 2002, p. 57)? Was this ‘new world’ manifest in spoken word space?

4.1.2 Subtheme 2: Rhetoric

Poets’ spoken word communities had queer representation and focus, but in what ways did they “contest the hegemonic supremacy of the majoritarian public sphere” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 1); that is, what made this queer convergence a subaltern counter-public (Chepp, 2012; Fraser, 1992; A. Johnson, 2009)? To affirm counter-public status, poets’ rhetoric should reveal a “critique of normativity” (Chávez, 2011; Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 46) by potently challenging and defying hetero- and cisnormativity (Halberstam, 2005). Did poets aim to “cultivate social consciousness raising and a specialized form of civic engagement” (Chepp, 2012, p. 225) in their local scenes? Did poets (implicitly) consider their queer artistic endeavours a “production of counterpublicity” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 143) or were other interpretations offered?

In numerous instances, poets revealed themselves as “transgressive subjects and their actions as identifiable social movements” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 149). For one, through oppositional politics (Chepp, 2012), they carried on the Butlerian (1990) tradition to ‘trouble’ the compulsory order of sex/gender/desire. As such, they readily eschewed traditional gender norms and the binary imperative, and used their art form as “political action in the face of a repressive binary gender regime” (Fryer, 2003, p. 149): “I want toooo, what’s the word I’m looking for? [quietly searching]. Like, challenge ideas about gender” (Poet 18). “For the sake of clarity, for the recording, I do not believe in the gender binary, I think it’s bad” (Poet 1). This decisive rendering (i.e., good vs. bad) tended to summon poets’ *slam* attitude or an ethos of agitation and retaliation: “I just want to fuck up people’s ideas of what gender norms should be because those are shitty

and dead anyway.” (Poet 3). Butlerian nihilism (i.e., “shitty and dead”) (Fryer, 2003) permeates this account. Furthermore, these narratives demonstrate the ways in which radical queers work to expand the range of expectable behaviours and identity categories (Hogan, 2005), and to reject essentialist understandings of gender (as discrete, immutable, homogeneous, etc.) (Grzanka, Zeiders, & Miles, 2016).

Participants’ historical and cultural location in “a new era of sexual politics” (Grzanka et al., 2016, p. 68) contributed to a fluid outlook on sexuality: “Sexuality is so fluid” (Poet 8). “Like, my mentality of thinking about it, I’m just, like, moving into a really fluid, a really fluid, um, ah, understanding of, um, my gender, my sexuality” (Poet 14). To express their “lived fluidities” (Fields et al., 2014, p. 316), poets appealed to the malleable discourse of queer, “alternative temporalities” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 2), and a subjunctive mood of “maybe, might be, as if, hypothesis, fantasy, conjecture, desire” (Turner, 1986, p. 42): “I definitely identify as queer. Cuz, I also recognize that, like, I, I am fluid and things will change” (Poet 17).

I’m just, like, ‘It’s the word that feels the best for me!’ I don’t know how else to describe this except that it is pretty fluid so I can explain it to you today and it’ll be different tomorrow, so I really don’t know. (Poet 7)

These extracts establish the “oblique angle of queer” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 162) as poets veered “away from models of the self that correlate with socially prescribed identity narratives” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 145).

Participants relished the ability of queer to deconstruct oversimplifications based on sexual orientation (Hogan, 2005): “...like, coming into being queer and being like, ‘I want everything to be queer now’” (Poet 1). “Queer, like, allows me to move, right? It allows me to, like, love up on anything, anything! Without there being any rigid—I don’t do good with

structure! You know?” (Poet 14). This latter extract directly evokes anti-structure, which has been theorized as a realm of confrontational activities and refashioning of the self, creating openness and a subjunctive mood (Abrahams, 2008). Participants often pursued confrontational activities through their physical embodiment: “I do feel the need for people to read me immediately as queer. It’s an important part of my identity and I don’t like when it’s unintentionally, um, not visible” (Poet 2). “I guess as an artist I try not to hide my queerness. Try to present within it.” (Poet 10). These extracts reveal the ways in which bodies can be used to pursue particular projects (Ashworth, 2015); in this case, the ability to “mediate the most private and intimate meanings of gender and sexuality” (Warner, 2002, p. 57).

How did poets “present within” their queerness? These efforts summoned the radical root of queer as “odd, bent, twisted” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 161). Indeed, the ability to embrace ambiguity in one’s identity was seen as an act of gender rebellion (Phelan, 1993): “I’m like a squiggly line. There’s ambiguity in my identity... And I like it. I want people to be confused when they see me.” (Poet 3). In a cultural analysis of queer spoken word, poets were seen as employing this mode of becoming in order to resist heteronormativity (Halberstam, 2005). Likewise, Poet 3 desired others to bear witness to, and be informed by, their radical (i.e., “squiggly”) queer display. This impulse factored into poets’ intentional consciousness (Fryer, 2003) as they approached the spoken word stage:

I feel, like, I’m mostly, like, look pretty queer. Most of the time. Um. And sometimes if I’m looking, like, specifically to perform, or want to specifically look queer or, like, present queer things. I will, like, dress more queer. And for me that means, like, more masculine probably most of the time. But, then, I also love to, like, gender fuck things. I’ll dress up with, like, dress shirt, bowtie, but then I’ll, like, do my eyelashes. (Poet 18)

Many poets, like Poet 3 and Poet 18, consciously constructed their unique queer aesthetic. As Poet 16 quipped: “A lot of people really wear their queer-hood as an accessory.”

These visual, embodied, and oratorical public rhetorical actions (Chávez, 2011) were used to recast poets’ identities and needs (Fraser, 1992). Temporally, poets coveted their three minutes of stage time in order to communicate their alterity and dissidence:

I don’t want to, like, tone down my queerness or, like, tone down the things that I talk about, um because, again, that’s the point of why I do what I do, is to start conversations, or have people be like, ooh, that made me uncomfortable, and maybe think about why that made me uncomfortable. (Poet 19)

I also view my style as very queer. Which is weird because I know clothing doesn’t have gender. But, like, I very visibly try to, like, umm, I don’t know. I try to let my style factor into my poetry and, like, because in the same way that people have to hear me for three minutes, they have to see me for three minutes. And, like, you know, some people might be uncomfortable with some of the stuff that I’m wearing but, like, I’m going to go on stage and you’re going to look at me. And you’re going to look at this. (Poet 4)

By highlighting “the physicality of performing on a stage with an ever-watching audience” (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 76), Poet 19 and Poet 4 embraced their role as ‘unsavoury queers’ (krpan, 2008). These *Outspoken* expressions impart images of resistance (Schoppelrei, 2019) which speak back to dominant discourse and hegemonic ideals. Poet 4’s ability “to take up that space that’s usually taken from [her]” speaks to the struggles against “confining and life-denying norms” (Butler, 2000, p. 33). Hence, in the face of exclusion, poets were establishing new norms of intelligibility.

This critique of “hetero- and homonormativity” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 153) and the desire to make one’s audience feel uncomfortable echoes the punk/riot grrrl/queercore movement (circa 1990s) whose members were known for taking risks on stage (Cowan, 2009). Like their predecessors, interviewees used *Outspoken* stage expression as a decisive way to assert and uplift queer ways of being:

Yeah, just this idea of art, like, making space for your identity in the world that’s constantly trying to squish it down and make it manageable, right? And you’re, like, ‘It’s not manageable.’ Right, it’s a big, crazy, thing that blows everyone back. Right, it’s like overwhelming and weirrrrd, right. (Poet 20)

This narrative speaks to the stylized and ritualized language of the rejected and their “willfully eccentric modes of being” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 1). Again, from a queer theory perspective, the poet’s identity ‘deviation’ (i.e., as ‘twisted’ or ‘oblique’) resisted reduction to a single line (Ahmed, 2006). However, who or what was “constantly trying to squish” down poets’ identities? Had *Outspoken* poets received a ‘flattening’ response to their deviation and disturbance of order (Ahmed, 2006)?

Regarding “the queer voice” (Poet 16) from above, interviewees were, at times, called upon for their queer and non-binary identities and/or *Outspoken* praxis. While this demand is encouraging, it could also provoke a reactionary response. For instance, competition for stage time (particularly, higher-profile showcases) among artists with varying identities could exacerbate any out-group tensions: “I’ve definitely heard, like, white dudes be like, ‘Ugh, the hardest thing to be right now in slam is, like, a white male poet cuz you don’t get gigs.’” ... “Like, ‘Ugh man, these lesbians are just, like, booking their tours across the states, exploiting their queerness, and I can’t do that because I’m not a woman’” (Poet 7). Poet 7’s use of

“lesbians” is noteworthy, as it is not how she or the other participants from this study identified; as such, she draws attention to both the speaker’s non-inclusive ethics and erroneous vernacular. To combat such reactionary discourse, a number of poets had performed “the, like, specifically, like, ‘acknowledge me as a queer person’ poem.” (Poet 5). This form of counter-public engagement has been interpreted as spoken word poets building and maintaining rhetorical power (A. Johnson, 2009).

While scholarly work on queer spoken word has centered on radical dissidence (e.g., Cowan, 2009; Halberstam, 2005; Krpan, 2008), there was also rhetoric in the current study that veered away from this mode of subjectivity. Namely, some poets channeled a blasé attitude and emphasized the relative ease with which they claimed their queer identities: “I’m very blasé about it all. Um, I don’t, you know, I’ve kind of grown past that part of my life where I was very unsure about who or what I was attracted to or whatever” (Poet 17). “Last year when I randomly was like, ‘bleh, queer’”... “It was like, Oh! It just popped out of my mouth” (Poet 14). While this particular deployment of queer could appear antithetical to counter-public theory, it is better interpreted as a push to expand the boundaries of *Outspoken* performance in spoken word beyond radical manifestations, which had a tendency to galvanize homonegative stereotypes of queer militancy. In fact, efforts to move beyond tokenized and reified representations toward “something larger, more spacious” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 154) is vital to counter-public production. Moreover, some scholars (i.e., Chávez, 2011) argue that those who ‘retreat’ to counter-publics do not necessarily receive harsh treatment in the public sphere. Thus, queer spoken word poets could “publicly challenge oppressive rhetoric” (Chávez, 2011, p. 3) regardless of the level of oppression they faced.

Recall queer poets embraced fluidity and eschewed labels. Poet 1, for example, embraced enigmatic aspects of her sexual identity, but took a blasé outlook on this alterity: “I don’t really care to label myself and I don’t care to be easy to understand for the people who don’t understand me. I don’t think that it should be relevant” (Poet 1). Recall subtler forms of *Outspoken* expression were interpreted as highly strategic, as a nonchalant delivery of queer content did not preclude poets from making strong political statements (e.g., normalizing queerness): “There’s no, like, you know, moment of truth. It’s, like, ‘Oh, okay’. Just sneak it in there and it’s like [sing-songy] normalized” (Poet 6). Indeed, at times, poets intentionally drew attention away from their queer identities and onto other aspects of themselves: “Yeah just, like, normalizing trans culture, and just being, like, you know, ‘So anyway I’m trans, and also, I like nachos’” (Poet 6). Phenomenologically speaking, as a “world-constituting agent of experience” (Fryer, 2003, p. 153), this account demonstrates the poet’s self-understanding based on particular *a priori* possibilities and constraints (e.g., “trans culture” requires “normalizing”).

In fact, a few poets conveyed a disinterested view on their gender and sexuality vis-à-vis their identity as a poet: “Those particular labels, like, like, gender identity, sexual orientation, I don’t get any power from owning those or claiming those, so they’re just kind of a non-issue for me” (Poet 5). From a poststructuralist perspective (Foucault, 1978), the participant’s discursive construction of “power” in relation to identity labels is critical: what does this construction mean for the poet’s “formation of subjectivity” (Crotty, 1998, p. 158)? This discourse demonstrates how power is productive and relational, rather than a ‘thing’ one possesses (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The poet attempted to legitimize her counter-positioning toward the historical and social reality in which she found herself (i.e., the institutionalized practices of slam and spoken word poetry). The inverse subject position was described by another poet: “If people are trying to, like,

be slam and ascend and fit into that box, queer is their weapon” (Poet 17). Queerness, then, can take on different dimensions and meanings depending on particular poets’ desires and practices.

In this sense, poets’ blasé construction of their gender and sexuality was done so with the “availability of discursive resources” (Willig, 2008, p. 172). Poets worked against dominant discourses on sexuality, which privilege conceptions of queerness as a disenfranchised subject position and as purveyors of negativity (Nielsen & Morrison, 2019). Alternative identities or experiences that *did* pose a challenge were a discursive resource poets drew on in order to authenticate their subject positioning: “I don’t really have many things to work through about being queer. Like the things that I work through aren’t really about being queer at all” (Poet 16). “It’s far from the most concerning thing that I’m going through, right? Like, as far as mental health and brain functioning” (Poet 5). Another poet sharply contrasted her queer and racialized identities in order to construct this blasé positioning:

I mean, like, my romantic and sexual attraction isn’t based on gender but also, like, my friends are dying in the streets so, like, I’ve got other shit to worry about.... Cops are killing my friends en masse. And it’s, like, yeah I like girls, but what the fuck does that have to do with anything right now? Like queerness is not the frontier at the moment.

Like right now we’re on the brink of a fucking race war and it’s, like, yeah I’m queer but like, so? So what? So what I’m queer. (Poet 7)

This apathetic view on queerness was a rhetorical strategy used to stress the timely specificity surrounding race. In doing so, the poet intentionally hierarchized her multiple marginalizations as opposed to focusing on “the intersection of multiple systems of oppression (e.g., racism, heterosexism, sexism)” (Scharrón-Del Río, 2020, p. 296).

While this instance could be regarded as a failure to accommodate an intersectional perspective, it also can be interpreted as rhetorical tactic used to challenge the idea that sexual orientation “is the defining aspect of LGB individuals” (Grzanka et al., 2016, p. 73). For example, it has been proposed that some communities of colour associate LGBTQ+ identity and culture as white and, consequently, feel they must suppress their race, ethnic, and class differences (Scharrón-Del Río, 2020). In this vein, resistance to the consideration of queer identity as a site of prejudice and discrimination was a discursive example of ‘extreme case formulation’ (i.e., “en masse”) used to communicate a “radical-leftist” (Poet 7) political perspective. As the poet continued: “It’s just, like, it’s not, yeah, I’ve got bigger fish to fry I guess.” Nevertheless, this rhetoric highlights that “one’s political goals are intimately attached to one’s identity and history” (Fryer, 2003, p. 140), which is also known as identity politics. In this case, queerness remained an object of consciousness, yet it was viewed as superfluous.

Many poets directly correlated this blasé attitude with an increasing acceptance of queerness in dominant culture: “I also feel, like, a certain responsibility to, like, reminding people of how, like, even now, we’re so lucky, like, the fact that we can be queer poets, and have it be a non-issue in our heads” (Poet 16). An emphasis on “luck” was used to reference “the backdrop of a rapidly transforming social climate” (Grzanka et al., 2016, p. 67). However, one poet attempted to disentangle their gender and sexuality with respect to prevailing discourses:

Sexual orientation is a non-issue to me. I would have no qualms about saying, ‘Oh yeah, this is my identity’ or, like, whatever. It’s weird too, that wouldn’t have been the case, back when I was a kid, too, they change.... I never really felt that I needed to hide that or feel weird about talking about that and I don’t know why. Maybe it’s a cultural thing that

society is just more bored of that than it used to be, now that doesn't even feel like an issue to me anymore. (Poet 13)

By referencing a “bored” society, Poet 13 directly draws on the idea of indifference (i.e., “no qualms”) regarding sexual orientation, which the poet posed as a relatively new phenomenon (approximately 20 years new). In this sense, the poet’s social-cultural-political-historical location at the “transgender tipping point” (Wanta & Unger, 2017, p. 119) was pivotal.

This blasé attitude was concomitant to the contemporary debate on ‘choice’ versus the immutability of sexual identity. Briefly, after “centuries of cultural and scientific debate over the origins and meaning of sexual orientation” (Grzanka et al., 2016, p. 68), the notion that sexual minorities cannot choose their sexual orientation has become an implied assumption about human sexuality (i.e., that we are ‘born this way’). These narratives were originally erected in order for individuals to acquire certain privileges and legal rights, but have now been reified by popular culture. While ‘naturalness’ explanations have become mainstream, scholars have begun to complicate this discourse as an essentialist conceptualization lacking radical sexual politics (Grzanka et al., 2016). One poet’s use of “chose” and “decide” vis-à-vis her queer identity maps onto an anti-essentialist framework: “If I decide to marry a woman then that’s when they’re going to have to shape up or ship out. Because that’s the family I chose” (Poet 8). For another, the ‘choice’ to be queer was positioned as a political ‘space-taking’ maneuver:

It’s in my bio that I’m queer. And it almost never comes up. But I think it’s important just to like...occupy as much space as possible with the names that, I guess, are the labels, I don’t know. That I have chosen to tag onto myself as part of my identity. (Poet 7)

Thus, some poets felt their queerness was inconsequential, as there was choice involved to “tag” it onto their identity profile: “Cuz I might feel queer today, tomorrow, I might feel, like,

not at all, right? And then what does that even mean? Like, what's queerness? Uh-uh-uh [I don't know]. Like, freedom? Like, if it means that: cool" (Poet 14). Given poets' claim to an adaptable and elastic approach to sexuality, it is understandable many poets celebrated the "freedom" to try new identities. Remarkably, some poets used both political and blasé rhetoric to describe their queerness: "Yeah, I'm queer but, like, so? So what? So what I'm queer [laughs]" (Poet 7). This paradoxical mode of subjectivity nuances the stereotypes of, and scholarship on, radical queer counterculture (e.g., Halberstam, 2005) and, as such, is an excellent example of how phenomenological researchers must put their "usual understandings in abeyance and have a fresh look at" the things themselves (Crotty, 1998, p. 80).

4.1.3 Subtheme 3: Quandaries

While rhetorical constructions of queer varied across the data, poets uniformly benefitted from the opportunity to explore and affirm their identities while in the 'queer counter-public.' Moreover, many poets applauded spoken word as a platform "for minorities to convince others that what in the past was not public in the sense of being a matter of common concern should now become so" (Fraser, 1992, p. 129). However, a critical reading revealed a complex depiction of the queer counter-public; for, at times, poets were markedly skeptical of this subaltern space: "it's pretty trans and queer friendly. In fact, maybe it's too trans and queer focused" (Poet 15). What 'quandaries' did Poet 15 face by virtue of their participation in the queer counter-public? Scholars have suggested that exaggeration (i.e., "too trans and queer focused") in political movements "may be speedily followed by despotism, over-bureaucratization, or other modes of structural [rigidity]" (Turner, 1969, p. 129). Though counter-publics may *intend* to be egalitarian and inclusive, they are not above "practicing their own modes of informal exclusion and marginalization" (Fraser, 1992, p. 124). This 'parochialism' (Tomaney, 2012) was observed

when alternative political viewpoints were readily pushed out of the community and, as a result, the artistic cultural production suffered.

On the one hand, poets extolled the virtues of a parochial outlook. For example, a sense of unity, attachment, and a shared political viewpoint (Tomaney, 2012) were productive in poets' commitments to social justice and anti-oppression: "The people who disagree or are homophobic, or transphobic, or misogynist tend to get pushed out pretty fast, which is good" (Poet 5). This form of exclusion was seen as a social achievement (Tomaney, 2012), which protected those who were at risk of various 'isms,' including homo- or transnegative encounters:

But if you don't want to learn, then we're going to ostracize you. Like, if you're actively being homophobic or transphobic and you don't take the accountability to be like, 'Hey, I'm doing something shitty'. Or if we point it out— we say to people, 'Hey, you're being shitty about this, you're being transphobic, you're being homophobic' and you're like, 'No, I'm not,' we're going to take steps to be like 'You're not welcome in our communities. (Poet 3)

These narratives display parochial traits, such as a strong sense of commitment and fidelity (Tomaney, 2012) among queer counter-public members. From this point of view, counter-public efforts to generate coalitions (Chávez, 2011) were fulfilled.

On the other hand, poets problematized local attachments and a territorial sense of belonging, as a "prisonhouse of particularism" (Tomaney, 2012, p. 663) could lead to exclusionary politics and cultural atrophy. For example, some interviewees were disapproving of trending political correctness: "There's a specific way to be the right politically correct person and if you fuck up that it's kind of like, 'Fuck you, get out'" (Poet 1). As a public and not an enclave (Fraser, 1992), concerns were raised that a sense of moral superiority could negate the

possibility of changing alternative (read unfavourable) political viewpoints: “Often there’s a complete [ostracism] of the people who you want to get it. Like, you want people to get it and sometimes...people just, exclude” (Poet 4). As might be expected, this firm and unwavering political vantage applied to poets’ stage performances as well:

If you’re going to go up there and do a really angry and alienating poem, like for the people in the audience who aren’t going to be alienated, you have to accept, you’re not changing hearts and minds today. You are fueling righteous rage. (Poet 1)

This context is important in conjunction to prior research, which has tended to romanticize the impacts of polemical self-expression in spoken word space.

This idea dovetails into another parochial tendency of the queer counter-public: that of artistic diversity. For one, the “contestatory function of subaltern counter-publics” (Fraser, 1992, p. 124) had become synonymous with the aforementioned “angry and alienating” (Poet 1) tone: “a lot of poets I feel like are just like, ‘I’m agreeing with you! I’m agreeing with everything. Why are you still yelling at me? Like I agree with you!’” (Poet 16). That Poet 16 agreed with the speaker’s “discursive contestation” (Fraser, 1992, p. 129) solidifies their common concern, but the rhetoric stemming from these activities was cast as overbearing (i.e., “righteous rage”). Relatedly, because of a distinct cultural message being repeatedly shared on stage, poets saw the collective artistic production in the queer counter-public suffer: “How long do we need before we’re just talking the same things over and over again to the same people, you know?” (Poet 5).

While spoken word has been praised for its remarkable diversity (J. Johnson, 2010), some poets looked beyond representations of identity to cultural production to critique this romanticism: “Diversity applies to artistic style as well as the other things. Right? So it doesn’t matter if you’re diverse in terms of other ways. If everyone is doing the exact same thing, that’s

still not good” (Poet 20). Veteran spoken word poets used their lived experience to detail a shift toward “militant particularism” (Tomaney, 2012, p. 663) in spoken word: “very much about politically correct. Can’t say this, can’t say this stuff. Not so much, it’s become more in a box slam stuff” (Poet 15). This description invokes a *Sturm und Drang* (Tomaney, 2012) – that is, ‘storm and stress’ – political climate at spoken word, which resulted in a tightly-bound (i.e., “in a box”) artistic register. From this vantage, local cultural attachments were “inevitably constraining” (Tomaney, 2012, p. 662) and resulted in high emotionalism.

Moreover, the influence and power of political opinion in the spoken word scene, more broadly, could lead to some members’ nearsightedness: “sometimes you wonder, it’s like, when you talk about the piece, do people actually like the writing of it, or do they just feel like, ‘Oh, I want to be supportive and progressive, so I have to like this’” (Poet 13). This account sheds new light on the claim that counter-publics provide space “where groups can explore ideas and arguments in encouraging environments” (Chávez, 2011, p. 2), for the analysis suggests that poets were intentionally aware (Fryer, 2003) that this encouragement was, in fact, contingent upon the content of the poem aligning with a particular set of values. Probing deeply into the “affective tone” (Ashworth, 2015, p. 30) of poets’ lifeworld proved critical. As an “objective fragment,” the discursive contestation of the queer counter-public was celebrated, but critical issues arose when the broader “cultural configuration” (Good, 1994, p. 33) was in view.

Interviewees who scrutinized this parochial outlook faced cognitive dissonance in doing so; for, on the whole, they appreciated the “practical solidarities” (Tomaney, 2012, p. 660) (i.e., shared political values), but not necessarily the dogmatic approach taken to alternative ways of thinking:

Probably be more queer people, or more people who are going to agree with me on certain things. And I think there was a certain comfort with that off the bat, which is a good and a—the safe space absolutely good. I don't know that I do know, but when I say assumptions about the political leanings of the people in the audience. I don't necessarily think that an art form necessarily has to have those values attached to it, and I, honestly, I guess I have mixed feelings about that because I do feel like we have a scene where there are certain opinions that are predominantly more valued, and they are opinions I do tend to agree with, so I have mixed feelings when it comes to that. (Poet 13)

This account provides considerable insight into the 'quandaries' of the queer counter-public. For while poets could bask in the "comfort of local truths" (Tomaney, 2012, p. 662), a nagging feeling (Fryer, 2003) endured when "certain opinions" were treated as law. This intersubjective 'dilemma,' in which interviewees purposefully distinguished themselves from other "ego-selves" (Fryer, 2003, p. 153), had serious implications for their artistic lifeworld:

People really started to, um, kind of, ah, really call out male privilege and call out misogyny. And it was good and bad. I think the good is obvious because you know it makes things better, ah for, you know, female-identified folks. Ah. But. Ah, it also... became less about art. (Poet 15)

Again, this rendering illuminates a bind (i.e., "good and bad") in which some interviewees found themselves. For while they often benefitted from, and agreed upon, the underlying values associated with these 'call outs,' the costs were high. Some poets felt the artistic production at spoken word had become stagnant and comprised of "poems that have very little quote unquote poetic [worth]" (Poet 20).

In this vein, poets took issue with any claims that this particular form of expression could make revolutionary strides: “This stage is already full of people who feel the same way” (Poet 15). “In the poetry scene, is this really controversial? Or are you preaching to the choir here?” (Poet 1). “If you’re addressing your poetry to people who already agree with you, it’s not really achieving anything” (Poet 16). Drawing on the spatially significant concept of an “echo chamber,” Poet 5 extended a similar critique of the queer counter-public:

It’s so strange. Cuz we’re at the point in our community where it’s basically an echo chamber where it’s the same feminist issues being regurgitated to an audience that implicitly agrees and it’s just like, you know, it’s very, um, one-dimensional right now. The poet’s use of “at the point” and “right now” locates the queer counter-public at an apex of parochialism, as Poet 15 continued: “There’s an overinflated sense of what activism, art activism is. And so that’s what I mean by too queer” (Poet 15). Interestingly, interviewees suggested that queer counter-public members who had newly experienced “the lure of the local” (Tomaney, 2012, p. 664) were particularly susceptible to *Outspoken* grandiloquence.

As anecdotal evidence of these quandaries, two interviewees described “an incident” (Poet 16) “at queer slam, queer open mic” (Poet 15) in which a group of attendees “called out a Black queer woman for being transphobic for wearing an ‘I heart vaginas’ shirt” (Poet 16). This ‘call out’ aligns with queer counter-public ‘rhetoric’ explored above (see Subtheme 2); namely, political action in the face of a repressive binary gender regime (Fryer, 2003). As Poet 15 recollected of the event: “the trans community was up in arms because that equates, you know, gender with body parts. And sexuality with body parts, and that’s not okay” (Poet 15). Both interviewees were deeply concerned this parochialism had transpired. They positioned “the young queers” as “forgetful” of what an “older Black queer woman” ... “has gone through to

wear that shirt” (Poet 16). Consequently, Poet 16 said: “It just made me sick.” Referring to their own identities, Poet 15 said: “I’m a trans person, that’s stupid.”

While social movement scholarship looks to the “process of people coming together to create meanings and *potentially* make progress toward a particular social change” (Chávez, 2011, p. 14, emphasis added), the ability of the queer counter-public to accomplish this feat was in jeopardy: “Slam poetry is super self-serving. When it’s built in a marginalized community in the first place, it’s self-serving at this point” (Poet 5). These accounts provide vital contextualization to scholarly assessments that individual “work demonstrates the far-reaching ability of poetry to specifically illuminate hidden or overlooked systems of oppression and transform this discrimination into a pressing issue of concern within the larger community” (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 84). For while, ideally, a collection of ‘issues of concern’ would operate together, to adumbrate possibilities in the “direction of deep coalition” (Lugones, 2003, p. 98), the polemical messages inspired by poets’ political commitments (Cvetkovich, 2003) were, at times, antithetical to building bridges. Namely, “clashes of character” (Turner, 1986, p. 39) and “the degeneration of identity politics into categories of exclusion was theoretically and politically detrimental” (Fryer, 2003, p. 140).

While some poets disputed the outreach capacities of spoken word poetry, “personal growth privileges” (Poet 5) were rarely undermined. By embracing their failed interpellation in the dominant public sphere, poets championed their “identities-in-difference” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 7) in the queer counter-public. As one interviewee exclaimed: “I just don’t hold back from what makes me queer or weird” (Poet 6). Nevertheless, interviewees acknowledged that “coming out is a fucking process” (Poet 3), which they applied to artistic self-disclosures as well. In a quest for internal understanding, how did poets use their art form to assert their queer identifications?

How did they conceptualize moments of queer expression on stage? With the queer counter-public established – including its ‘convergences,’ ‘rhetoric,’ and ‘quandaries’ – the following theme moves inward, toward the fertile intersection of ‘queer’ and ‘artist.’

Chapter 5: Theme 2

5.1 Queer Omnipresence

Queer – in all its elusive glory – was foregrounded in many poets’ existence as it affected their artistic lifeworld in manifold ways: “I mean I also write a lot about my gender and sexuality. Because they are really omnipresent parts of my life” (Poet 9). Phenomenologically, as an “object” of consciousness, queer provided poets with a worldly dimension as “embodied, sensitive, and situated” subjects (Ahmed, 2006, p. 27). As explored in the previous theme, the experience of writing and performing spoken word poetry allowed poets to refashion their non-normative genders and sexualities. By delving deeper into the ways poets “vocally made meaningful” (Turner, 1986, p. 43) their counter-hegemonic identities and experiences, this theme continues to expose the intricacies surrounding *Outspoken* lived experience.

Predictably, many poets’ artistic work centred on queer experience: “Um, my poetry usually covers, um, queer experience” (Poet 4). “Being queer is often a big part of my work” (Poet 18). When asked about the topics of their poetry, queerness had immediacy and primacy, as displayed in the following discussions: Elly-Jean: “what sort of topics does your poetry tend to cover?” Poet 20: “Ahhh, so being trans.” Elly-Jean: “K. I wanna talk about that [laughs].” Poet 20: “Yeah, being gay.” Elly-Jean: “I wanna talk about that [laughs]. Perfect.” Elly-Jean: “What are the main topics of your poetry is the next question. So it’s perfect timing.” Poet 3: “Um. Being trans.” Elly-Jean: “Mmmhm.” Poet 3: “Being queer.” Elly-Jean: “Mmhm.” Likewise, many poets identified their poetry *as* queer: “I do write a lot of queer stuff” (Poet 2). “My non-queer poems. Oh wait, I don’t have any!” (Poet 19).

How did poets characterize artistic ‘queer omnipresence’? Poems with queer meanings and content ran the gamut, but one common manifestation was poetry based on queer love and

attraction. These artistic manifestations demonstrated interviewees' pull of desire along a queer axis (Ahmed, 2006): "I have a whole poem about my preference of, like, being attracted to people who are gender queer" (Poet 10). In one breath, poets could express their feelings of love and affection as well as their queer selfhood: "And then I was all caught up in the whirlwind of queer love and it was wonderful. So I wrote so many love poems" (Poet 3). While described as a "wonderful" experience, Poet 3's idiom of being "caught up in the whirlwind" hints at the all-encompassing and unruly nature of these expressions.

For example, the experience of a gender transition could dictate poets' artistic output: "Because I'm in transition, it's influencing my work really heavily right now" (Poet 6). In some cases, this influence was considered all consuming:

It's unfortunate the way it's been wrapped up in being trans. It's pretty, ah, yeah, it's pretty, I'm writing a lot about my gender. Even, even when I don't want to, even when I'm trying not to. It tends to come back. Which is really fucking hard, sometimes [Elly-Jean: laughs]. Cuz, I want to write about something else. I just want to write something fun. (Poet 15)

This example speaks to the potency of crossing (and re-crossing) "politically charged lines of representation" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 71); namely, as a life event, a gender transition carried "special weight" (Ashworth, 2015, p. 27). Incidentally, the powerful resonance surrounding transgender identity mirrors earlier writings by Sedgwick (1990) on gay-affirmative struggle.

Gender transitions, as a particular moment in time, appeared to hold distinct cultural meaning (Ashworth, 2015). Poet 20, who had written and performed spoken word through a gender transition, noted an appreciable change in tone *after* she had transitioned:

And so a lot of my early poetry was about transitioning, right. Ahh because, no duh, big thing going on in my life at the time. Um, whereas now I think I've moved away from the idea of transitioning towards the idea of being trans.

These narratives suggest that “being trans” (Poet 20) had subtler artistic influence than being “in transition” (Poet 6), as the former extended and diversified poets’ artistic register to include far-ranging queer (and non-queer) aspects of themselves. Poet 13, who had recently begun exploring trans aspects of themselves on stage, offered deep personal insight onto this distinction:

People who are farther along or more comfortable with themselves, is that once they get past their own insecurities then they're able to respond to these things where it's not self-preservation, it's not about them, it becomes about, you know, being a part of a larger community and being visible and representing it. It becomes those things. So I think just who I am as a person, I'm just not quite there yet. Unfortunately.

The “explicit temporal dimension” (Bruner, 1986, p. 7) of this narrative is crucial: If Poet 13 is “not quite there yet,” then where are they? What do these sentimental feelings of being in-between mean (Ahmed, 2006)? And, “through the imbuing of subjectivity” (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 75), how did writing and performing spoken word poetry help poets to illuminate significant life transitions?

Next, these questions will be addressed via three subthemes of ‘queer omnipresence’: ‘explorations,’ ‘liminalities,’ and ‘constraints.’ Firstly, poets used spoken word for queer ‘explorations,’ for example, to come out; hone their identities; and/or, decorate their queer experiences in an unfettered and nuanced fashion. Queer ‘explorations’ were a momentous undertaking, as profound complexities surfaced when poets physically and emotionally expressed themselves on stage. These intricacies can be aligned with the useful terminology of

'liminalities' as this ritual process entailed, at times, "the stripping of statuses, the renunciation of roles, [and] the demolishing of structures" (Turner, 1987, p. 107). For instance, many poets used their aesthetic form to remark on the limitations set out by the gender binary. Lastly, while positive reception was the norm, poets experienced considerable 'constraints' when they brought *Outspoken* works to the stage, which, too, require close reflection to gain fuller understanding of this significant lived experience.

5.1.1 Subtheme 4: Explorations

Scholars of spoken word have noted that continual self-reflexivity is expected during "a particularly precarious moment of cultivating one's sense of self" (Rivera, 2013, p. 114). Likewise, in the current research, spoken word poetry was used as a tool of queer self-discovery. Recall from above (see *Outspoken*) that spoken word could aid the coming out process because numerous people were in attendance: "How do you come out to such a big number of people? Right, like, do you do it one-by-one, right, the stage is a way of just sort of announcing to the world, like 'This is who I am'" (Poet 20). Moreover, because queer disclosures at spoken word were "not just a diary entry and, like, hidden in your room" (Poet 12), poets gleaned a sense of release from sharing these expressions. Poet 15, for example, suggested that a "psychobiological" (Turner, 1969, p. 129) transfer could occur with *Outspoken* expression:

The advantage to talking about that is that you let go of it. Right. You let go of holding onto it. Right. And that's a powerful, powerful, powerful thing. To be able to say, here I am, 'I'm this, I'm that' I don't have to carry it myself; the community carries it.

These extracts highlight the social and spatial extension of queer identity to other community members, which had liberatory (i.e., "powerful, powerful, powerful") effects. Hence, spoken

word was cast as a potentially unmatched arena to express one's identity, queer or otherwise, with performance aspects especially key to the consummation of *Outspoken* expression:

The advantages of expressing yourself period is kind of a healthy thing. And I think expressing a part of you that, maybe as someone who has been closeted, I think I absolutely needed to express that in some form or another. (Poet 13)

This articulation illustrates the ways in which (queer) experience is urged toward expression (Turner, 1986). Furthermore, the interpretation that self-expression is “a healthy thing” supports the idea that a performance is the proper finale of an experience (Turner, 1982).

Crucially, some poets expressed their queerness for the first time in spoken word spaces: “I was out in this community but not really out anywhere else. And, um, ah, so that was, this was my space to be myself” (Poet 15). Likewise, interviewees who faced identity struggles and/or queer diaspora could garner a vital sense of place in the ‘queer counter-public’: “I was still fairly new queer then, and sort of wrestling with all these ideas. And it was the first time I really felt like I fit in somewhere. Which was the most amazing thing ever” (Poet 18). Crucially, when Poet 13 self-disclosed on stage, it was their *first* time coming out:

I think poetry is always a more extreme version of me. It was factored in as being the first place I could really talk about those things. Because I talked about it on stage in front of, as a poem, before I had told anyone in my personal life any of these things.

Poet 13's use of a “more extreme version of me” speaks to poets' personal project (Ashworth, 2015) of creating and cementing an *Outspoken* existence.

How did this “extreme” expression alter and change the poet's “me” outside the spoken word milieu? Using a pathway metaphor, which befits this ‘explorations’ subtheme, Poet 10 offered reflexive insight on the ways artistic self-expression can proliferate queer identities:

Spoken word has actually been helpful to me to feel more comfortable to express my queerness outside the spoken word scene because when I perform, and people have seen me perform. And then that gets passed out, in whatever way, YouTube, or people talking, ah, it's almost like: so I have an experience, and I perform a piece to you, that says that I'm out and I'm queer, whatever. And, then, that creates a pathway between us. And, then, I step outside, and that person is outside the spoken word scene, but we have this link into the spoken word. So it's, like, carved out all these different [rivets?]. That like have allowed my queerness to flow out of the spoken word scene into my broader circles.

The spatial significance of queer is clearly demonstrated in this passage. For example, Poet 10's description of her queerness flowing out into "broader circles" harks back to the "ripple effect" (Poet 20) of queer 'convergences' explored above (see Subtheme 1). Metaphorical descriptors (e.g., "pathways," "rivets") were used to illustrate the flow (e.g., "carved out," "flow out") of queer experience both inside and outside spoken word space. Importantly, as the poet reoriented herself (i.e., "step outside"), it became clear that her bodily dwelling was "deeply affected and shaped by its surroundings" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 9) (i.e., "we have this link").

Relatedly, a number of poets were able to hone their queer identities through their art form. Recall, as part of the queer counter-public, poets scrutinized the binary imperative and made attempts to understand their "own queerness within those binaries" (Poet 1). Because queer and social justice movements move "very fast, and there are new identities, everyday. And people have words to put to things" (Poet 16), poets highly valued this honing process. Through the process of creating spoken word, one poet remarked that she "cracked some massive code" (Poet 1) obfuscating her queer sexuality: "It's so close to my heart because it's my 'I-figured-out-my-sexuality-trying-to-express-my-wrong-sexuality'" (Poet 1). In phenomenological terms,

many poets celebrated their capacity to uncover and celebrate non-binary “possibilities” (Fryer, 2003, p. 154) through spoken word:

Partially, for myself. To help me figure out my identity – cuz, my identity is really complex and [there are] so many different facets of it. I’m gender fluid so it all changes all the time. And I think that we live in such a binarist world and we live in a world with so limited possibilities. And it hurts me so much! Because I feel like there [are] so many possibilities inside me, you know? (Poet 4)

This lamentation (“it hurts me so much!”) speaks to the challenges and pain that can be imposed by normative gender roles (see also Fields et al., 2014). The poet champions the “possibilities inside” herself that a contemporary social landscape regularly attempted to delegitimize (Rivera, 2013); hence, she was able to facilitate an aesthetic that could valorize new and unique expressions of “trans experience” (Fryer, 2003, p. 157).

The advantage of using spoken word “to better understand your queer identity” (Poet 4) was salient and widespread in the data. This utilization was enticing to many poets, as they aimed to acquire heightened understandings of their enmeshed identities in relation to the world around them: “Because you can’t discount that part of your identity when writing because you are a 3D person” (Poet 3).

The stuff that I was writing about was while I was still figuring out exactly what words made me feel most comfortable and what did this aspect of myself mean for all these other aspects of myself. So being able to write through that and perform through that is really helpful. (Poet 2)

This process of “subject formation and authentication” (Rivera, 2013, p. 115), which is characteristic of spoken word more broadly, was imperative and generative: “A good place to

experiment to kind of gradually try different things and do some things and kind of open up to parts of myself I wasn't really out" (Poet 13). The rhetorical division of self (i.e., "aspects of myself," "parts of myself") illustrate the meeting and nurturing of poets' queer selves.

Finally, poets savoured their ability "to build a story" (Poet 3) through spoken word. Many poets' *Outspoken* works were highly nuanced, and designed with an educational message in mind. For example, Poet 3 desired to "help build a puzzle of what my parents think about my gender and how, how...I want other trans kids to feel and how I want parents of trans kids to relate to their kids." Painting queer experience with a full range of characterization (i.e., many "puzzle" pieces) was of utmost importance to interviewees, as they aimed to "embrace maybe the positive and the negative realities" (Poet 13) of their lived experiences. This critical stance was valuable on both personal and collective levels, as it allowed poets to recognize and redress any 'gaps' in collective queer expression:

I saw a lot of people who talked about being queer and they were very, you know, out. They were very strong, very self-affirmed in who they were, which is great...it's very important to get out there, but I think it's important to remember the people who aren't the people who you may not know are, umm, you know, queer at all who are still struggling with it. (Poet 13)

Thus, some poets desired to go beyond the trope of the "queer anthem poem" (Poet 16) toward something more nuanced, which can do justice to the "totality of the person, 'warts and all'" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 54). Thus, *Outspoken* performances could at once honour their lived experiences and project a desired 'truth' to the larger collective (Bruner, 1986).

A propensity to decorate queer experience with a full range of characterization also could include risqué artistic choices, such as the re-appropriation of homophobic and transphobic slurs:

It's written as a positive, affirmative thing to do, right. To, like, play these words. But also they're still slurs, right. They're still awful, right. And they've turned into this climate of hate, right. And so it's like—and it's, like, it's both of those things at the same time ... And it's not like you can be, like, 'It's all good or it's all bad.' Right, you know. Right and it's just, like, holding space for the contradictions. (Poet 20)

In the same vein, Poet 4 rejected the idea of having a specific spoken word style: "I can do a poem about how I love being trans and then I can do a poem about how I hate all of the violence I face and like—so that dualism is hard." Likewise, in a poem about "fluidity and conflict," Poet 13 endeavoured to elude one-dimensionality in their art: "So you got your ups and downs so you can, I think, I wanted kind of a bittersweet feeling to it."

Poets were able to explore the deeper crevices of their queer identities through spoken word, and boldly embraced any ambiguities that emerged. As they illuminated the inherent messiness surrounding queer lived realities, poets were in tune with the foundation of both phenomenology and queer theory. How did poets use their art form to navigate and decorate such unique, and at times, contradictory, structures of experience (Turner, 1986)?

5.1.2 Subtheme 5: Liminalities

When poets held "space for the contradictions" (Poet 20), they made room for the otherness and in-between statuses that queerness can create. This idea aligns with the concept of 'liminality' or lived experience at the 'threshold': "where what has been hidden is thus manifested" (Turner, 1987, p. 92). Given that "artists tend to be liminal and marginal people" (Turner, 1969, p. 128), it is not entirely surprising that poets gave voice to their navigation of queer 'liminalities.' For example, through poetry, Poet 5 drew attention to "a pretty universally queer experience of having feelings for somebody in a situation where it's of a gender that you

don't know if they're queer as well or you don't know what's going on, and it's tricky navigating that." By remarking on "the danger of telling somebody how you feel" (Poet 5), this artistic commentary shed light on the effects queer can have on relations with others (i.e., intersubjectivity). This liminal experience could be extended to other (read platonic) interpersonal relationships as well:

That is the one poem that kind of touches on those moments when you have to hold parts of yourself back a little bit and you have to let things out very slowly to test the waters about finding out whether this is a safe space or not. (Poet 2)

These accounts evidence queer self-disclosures as highly sensitive to interpersonal nuances (Ashworth, 2015). Furthermore, that poets needed to gauge their safety (i.e., "test the waters") before disclosing their queer identities is an important contextualization to the aforementioned rapidly changing social climate for LGBTQ+ individuals.

Recall, poets aimed to acquire heightened understandings of their enmeshed identities in relation to the world around them: "So I have a lot more poetry lately about navigating that. As like a non-binary bisexual Catholic" (Poet 9). According to Poet 9, "being in both worlds and being, like, just trying to find the space I belong in there" required sustained reflexivity. This metaphorical account of "being in both worlds" conjures up images of threshold locationality. The alterity surrounding their intersection of identities urged the poet to make sense of their subjunctive state, because they didn't "feel like those things conflict, but a lot of people think they do" (Poet 9). This account speaks to the ways "selfhood takes place in a lifeworld in which it can often be affirmed or undermined by others" (Ashworth, 2015, p. 26), with poetry serving as an essential tool to express "marginalized positionality" (Rivera, 2013, p. 121).

Interestingly, performing *Outspoken* work on stage was a decisive act that, in ways, could contradict or challenge poets' sense of being "betwixt and between" (Turner, 1969, p. 95):

For instance, that performance at CFSW there was, ah, a person I actually work with at it who came to support someone else I didn't know that they knew each other. This is someone I would not be out to otherwise. And it was really weird where, like, where it's, like, oh I want to make myself very visible. And then I kind of want to take it back right away. Being, like, because I'm someone who, I think, should have been or should be if I was a braver person be out on a day-to-day basis but I'm not entirely, so I do feel, like, there's moments when I want to be so visible and there's moments I want to be so invisible. (Poet 13)

Coming back to "the physicality of performing on a stage with an ever-watching audience" (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 76), this oscillation between in/visibility provides profound information on human vulnerabilities in an intersubjective setting. The expressed wish to be a "braver person" evidences the poet's moral reflexivity (Turner, 1987). Herein, the desire to be (in)visible represented "a hermeneutic circle" (Bruner, 1986, p. 6): something the poet needed to work through, in which they were "willing or wishing forward" (Turner, 1982, p. 18), with the goal of incumbency of post-liminal status (i.e., "out on a day-to-day basis").

Thus, *Outspoken* performances were far from a neutral undertaking, as many poets' understandings of their queer identities – including the saliency of the closet (Sedgwick, 1990) – were marked by dialectical thinking. Coming back to Poet 9's identity tensions, performing the *Outspoken* led them to a questioning stance that is typical of the "undifferentiated character of liminality" (Turner, 1969, p. 104):

What if someone from my church just happens to find out about the poetry slam? And, then, suddenly I have to make that decision of, do I still perform this poem? Do I still out myself on stage? Is it safe for me to do this?

This account highlights poets' cognitive dissonance or "conflictual tendencies" (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 81) in the ritual process of narrative restructuring and performing the *Outspoken*. However, the significance of the liminal situation, as structurally inferior or marginal, lies in poets' ritual powers to fashion anew (Turner, 1969).

Thus, while liminality could cause social disruption in poets' lives, it also could bring about renewed efforts at self-discovery (Becker, 1997; Turner, 1982), as it has been said to spark an aspect of potentiality and conjure up a subjunctive mood (Turner, 1969). For example, Poet 4 buoyed her ontological existence through her aesthetic form by commenting on the significance and vitality of a betwixt and between gender identity:

I feel like there is so many possibilities inside me, you know? Like there's so much in me and we're told that gender means genitals and that's it and poetry has been really important for me to realize that, no, gender can be like natural disasters, gender can be the stars, gender – like your gender can be, like, the ocean, like you can find ways to describe your gender that like you've never heard before. And, often, for a lot of non-binary people, they have a stronger connection to those metaphors than they do to any words that exist. Because, like, the words that exist, you know, they were written by people who don't have those identities so, like, we get to write our own identities and we get to express our own stories. And I think it's really taking back the right to identify ourselves and to say, 'No, my gender isn't because of this thing. My gender is a multitude of complex identities and feelings.' And, also, poetry is a really great place to be, like,

‘I’m going to tell you that my gender is, like, a wave. And my gender is, like, lightning.’

And I’m going to say these things. So I’m going to express it.

This vivid passage illustrates the human urge to unsettle dominant narratives. It reads as a declaration of the poet’s “hard-won meanings” (Turner, 1986, p. 37) of her gender as an “active, volatile, creative force” (Bruner, 1986, p. 16). The “the route to indigenous meaning” (Bruner, 1986, p. 16) required the poet to decolonize normative gendered structures (“They were written by people who don’t have those identities.”). For example, the oppressive tradition to make causal inferences for those who fall outside the norm (“My gender isn’t because of this thing”) was redressed.

Furthermore, comparisons were made between gender and unique phenomena, including: monstrous images drawn from nature (i.e., “stars,” “the ocean”), ordeals (i.e., “natural disasters”), paradoxical instructions (i.e., “like you’ve never heard before”), and ambiguous identity (i.e., “a stronger connection to those metaphors than...to any words that exist”) are typical of the liminal phase (Turner, 1986). Recourse to simile and metaphor served as a rhetorical antidote to pre-existing discursive structures (i.e., “the words that exist”) that operate in the service of the normative order (Fryer, 2003). Spoken word poetry was deemed a “really great place” to resist and configure imposed identities (see also Fields et al., 2014). When Poet 4 urged her experience toward expression (“I’m going to say these things. So I’m going to express it”), she aimed to disrupt social constructions and make sense of “those moments when life is lived most intensely” (Bruner, 1986, p. 13). For these reasons, liminality has been called a “storehouse of possibilities” (Turner, 1986, p. 42), or as Poet 4 begun this insightful portrayal: “I feel like there is so many possibilities inside me” (Poet 4).

Liminal experiences have been said to erupt or disrupt routinized behaviour, which create shocks of pain and/or pleasure followed by the anxious need to find meaning in this altered state (Turner, 1986). For example, many poets were unable/unwilling to repress their understandings of gender as a historical creation. Like Poet 4, “hard-won meanings” (Turner, 1986, p. 37) were written and performed into their artistic works. For Poet 3, a meaningful representation of their gender on stage was that which aligned their words and physical appearance: “The way I dress and the way I choose to make my body and if I’m doing a poem about being trans-masc, I’m going to be wearing my binder” (Poet 3). However, some non-binary poets felt they were at the mercy of their physical body or embodied liminality (Turner, 1969): “People will generally conceive me as a cisgender, straight man. Unless I give evidence to the contrary. Because just with the body that I have” (Poet 13). Because corporeality is inseparable from the whole/others, seeing other transgender people left Poet 13 feeling “more disheartened because there’s that comparison of seeing people who are changing themselves.” A hyperawareness of the body led one poet to write about their transfeminine existence:

I remember being in the tub and just getting really tired of... people not seeing me. You know, like, cuz I was not out so I was not dressing feminine all the time. Just being invisible. I guess that’s when I did feel invisible, to go back to that, is-is-is when I’m dressed, when I’m presenting more masculine. Then I do feel invisible. (Poet 15)

This layered or meta-account depicts the poet viewing their naked body, which brought them to a pensive and creative state. Liminality’s “limbo of statuslessness” (Turner, 1969, p. 97) is evidenced by the way the poet had grown tired of their invisibility. However, this “existential encounter” (Turner, 1986, p. 36) inspired them to write about their ontology in a way that “is not based on sedimented layers of ideologically-based knowledge that we have inherited but that,

instead, encourages us to explore the various and multiple possibilities for experiencing gender” (Fryer, 2003, p. 156).

In a similar vein, Poet 13 wished to avoid “falling into the traps of identity politics or essentialism” (Fryer, 2003, p. 157) when they expressed their transfeminine gender identity:

You know the classic outfits in front of me, or sometimes as much as it is a cliché, I’ve also gone to a lot support groups where there are people who totally do this. Like, you know, so, yeah, I don’t know, I guess within that I just, I want, to, going forward, I’d want to change the way I approach it to not have a narrow view of what that means.

This extract hints at one’s “muddled search for meaning” (Turner, 1986, p. 39) alongside others’ who share particular lived experiences (e.g., transgender expression). Again, poets desired to honour their liminal statuses by rejecting one-dimensionality or the “clichés of status incumbency” (Turner, 1969, p. 128) toward a fuller range of queer/er expression.

While ‘liminalities’ could pose unique challenges, poets reported on far more pressing and adverse ‘constraints’ in their pursuit of *Outspoken* expression. These challenges led one poet to debunk the predominant interpretation of spoken word as a safe space: “There’s this myth that the stage is a safer space” (Poet 5). This third subtheme of ‘queer omnipresence’ will hone in on the reverberations of *Outspoken* stage expression, as Poet 5 continued: “but as soon as you step off that stage, it’s no longer safe anymore because everybody can react or confront you and you’re dealing with the rest.”

5.1.3 Subtheme 6: Constraints

What was Poet 5 “dealing with” when she stepped off the spoken word stage? When poet and audience share the same object of attention (i.e., an *Outspoken* performance), how does it affect the poet’s lifeworld (Ashworth, 2015)? Did poets face inherent challenges when they

performed *Outspoken* work (i.e., irrespective of their level of experience)? Finally, why did Poet 5 wish to debunk the myth of the stage as a safer space? By highlighting the social ramifications of an *Outspoken* performance, Poet 5 spoke to the ways others are wholly implicated in an experience (Ashworth, 2015). These lived ‘constraints’ of *Outspoken* expression were a product of poets’ social relations with queer counterparts as well as other members of slam subculture (i.e., poets, judges, attendees).

To begin, the incidence of identity-based poetry in spoken word (Somers-Willett, 2005; 2009) paved the way for poets’ sexual and gender identities to become a focal point; but, similar to a discourse explored above on “the queer voice” (Poet 16), some poets resisted the nominal distinction of “the queer poet” (Poet 5; Poet 16; Poet 17). These interviewees reported feeling pegged or pigeonholed by their queer identity: “If you become super successful, you’ll become pigeonholed. Oh, you’re the woman-poet. You’re the queer-poet. You’re the queer-woman-poet, right?” (Poet 5). To wit, a hyperfocus on queerness could deny poets “a healthy pluralism” (Yardley, 2000, p. 218) and effectively tokenize them: “Once you put certain things out there, is this what everything’s going to be for me now?” (Poet 13). Moreover, some poets worried their performances were better received when their queer identity was the explicit focus: “I don’t want to be booked to only talk about being trans” (Poet 6). “You don’t want people to like you just because you’re queer. Or you know, just because you’re a woman either” (Poet 16). “Do I want to be a non-binary queer poet? And how, yeah! And like sort of wondering, do I want people booking me just because of that? Or do I want people booking me because I’m a poet?” (Poet 19). Poet 19’s questioning stance suggests poets faced some cognitive dissonance regarding the constraints of queer omnipresence.

Despite being accurate, then, “the queer poet” (Poet 5) had a negative side: “I don’t want to be...the queer poet” (Poet 17). “It’s hard because you don’t want to be pegged as ‘the queer poet’” (Poet 16). “I’m not a queer poet. I’m a poet who happens to be queer” (Poet 8). Thus, while queerness had an omnipresence in poets’ lives, they endorsed that “queer is not all of who you are” (Poet 13): “But I don’t necessarily...walk around expressing, ‘Hey, I’m queer, before I’m, hey, I’m me’” (Poet 11). Moreover, poets’ descriptive accounts of queer labelling employed imagery of being pigeonholed (i.e., constricted and confined): Poet 7: “Umm, yeah, I mean it also kind of puts you in a...in a box.” Elly-Jean: “Mmm...even queer?” Poet 7: “Even queer.” In this excerpt, the poet touched on the in-group tensions surrounding the use of queer, which Poet 14 shed further light on: “When they bring in their binaries, or they bring in their, like, boxes. And then try and, like, bring me into that thing, right? Like even queer spaces” (Poet 14). Essentially, poets remarked that “even queer” (Poet 14; Poet 7), with its desirable breadth and ambiguity, could pose limitations on poets’ self-identifications: “When so much of the poetry community is queer. There’s even policing queer-queer” (Poet 5). (See also Subtheme 3).

Were there ways, then, for poets to artistically communicate their queerness *and* evade queer pegging? The most common technique poets voiced was to enhance the multidimensionality of their work. As Poet 20 said of one of her pieces: “It’s definitely trying to, like, show people the whole person. Right, you know, it’s, like, I’m trans but I’m also all these other things. Right, mixed in.” Interestingly, according to one poet, the absence of political content in her art could ‘free’ her from excessive categorization: “Because I don’t do political stuff, I’m not held onto the same pedestals or pigeonholed the same way that other visibly femme people are” (Poet 5). Overall, poets deemed diverse *Outspoken* expression a protective mechanism against queer pigeonholing: “I’m going to go out on a limb and say that maybe some

of those people that get typecast made their own bed a little bit. Perhaps. By only doing this over and over and over again” (Poet 15). This account harks back to the parochial aspects of the ‘queer counter-public,’ for while the poets applauded an emphasis on nurturing queer expression, they disapproved of cumulative one-dimensional artistic portrayals.

Poets also faced queer ‘constraints’ that were tethered to the structural aspects of spoken word poetry as an artistic enterprise. While queer inclusivity was the social norm at spoken word, the events were public. As Poet 2 explained: “They are open and accepting environments, but they are open doors so you never know who’s going to walk in.” Thus, homonegative encounters could occur with “indefinite strangers” (Warner, 2002, p. 86), for example when “a terrible poem goes up, or someone is homophobic while talking to you” (Poet 9). Because spoken word directs the audience’s gaze toward the poet (Schoppelrei, 2019), it was impressed upon participants to stay vigilant when performing *Outspoken* work: “But I still have to factor in that strangers are going to be there. And I still have to walk home. And I still have to be in public spaces” (Poet 3). In other words, being *Outspoken* had the potential to uncover non-inclusive attitudes and beliefs: “There’s so many, like, hidden homophobic, transphobic people you would never expect” (Poet 18). These constraints on poets’ personal project (Ashworth, 2015) of having an *Outspoken* existence are an important addendum to prior qualitative research that emphasized poets’ empowerment from sharing highly personal information with strangers (i.e., Alvarez & Mearns, 2014).

These socially and spatially relevant aspects of the poets’ lifeworld were particularly acute during a slam: “slam is still part of society. And as hard as we try to be, like, more politically with it, our doors are open” (Poet 17). Because slam hosts aim to select judges “who have never been to a poetry slam before” (Poet 1), interviewees remarked that “all of their biases

are likely still in place” (Poet 1) when handed a score card. Thus, poets tended to infer bias when *Outspoken* works were given low scores: “I always worry a little bit that it’s going to affect my scores in a negative way” (Poet 2). “I’ve been judged by homophobes, like, it’s not hard to figure out that your poem that sometimes gets, like, an eight point nine gets a three point four from someone” (Poet 6). “There was, ah, a judge who was, like, very outwardly transphobic in his judging. And, ah, very misogynistic, and just, like, very shitty” (Poet 16). With no clear-cut way to ascertain if judges were biased in their scoring, poets were left to ruminate on these adverse occurrences: “This is a weird one, because you don’t know for sure, but I think there’s some times where I’ve felt, like, there’s been judges who have definitely given lower scores because of who I am” (Poet 15). However, poets also stressed the cultural insignificance of points in the slam system: “I might score worse, like, I don’t know. It’s impossible to tell, right. I also don’t care” (Poet 20).

While generally unperturbed by a low slam score, a more pressing concern, voiced by some poets, was the risk of danger. For example, poets carefully assessed the spatial-temporal aspects of their lifeworld before sharing their more polemical works: “This poem will never go on the Internet because I know there’s inherent risks of, like, political turmoil in—that comes with being, like, a coloured woman. Queer coloured woman even at that” (Poet 8). Reference to “political turmoil” and her interlocking identities (i.e., a “queer coloured woman”) conjures up the familiar cultural image of a radical artist who is keenly aware of the dangers associated with vocalizing a progressive political agenda (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Muñoz, 1999). Poet 3 elaborated on this concept by drawing attention to the double-edged sword of being *Outspoken*:

Exposure is good, but also exposure is dangerous. It’s like hypervisibility. So, if I do a poem that’s blatantly trans, I, um, am at more risk of violence walking home that night.

Because I just came out to the public and someone could be like, ‘Hey, I want to be violent towards that person.’ Because of my identities. So you have to be aware of where you are.

This narrative makes explicit the ongoing reality of queer-based violence as it relates to many lifeworld fractions (e.g., emotional, spatial, embodied). An awareness of “hypervisibility” aligns with the phenomenological idea of poets as world-constituting subjects who distinguish themselves from other egos (Fryer, 2003). As *Outspoken* artists, poets were required to recognize their “three-dimensional world” (Fryer, 2003, p. 154) with hidden sides (e.g., others’ perceptions) and temporal dimensions (e.g., post-stage performance). Because “intentional consciousness” (Fryer, 2003, p. 154) could not be directed to all elements at once, Poet 3 emphasized their patience (i.e., extension of the temporal dimension): “There’s spaces where it took me a long time to come out. Because it took a long time for me to build enough trust, that I could trust those people wouldn’t be violent towards me.” Echoing these sentiments, Poet 4 said the following:

I mean there’s always the risk of violence. And there’s always the risk of, you know, cuz I’m, like, I use my real name on stage. If somebody saw something they didn’t like of me they know I’m going to be at the slam every month. So there is that potential risk of violence.

Though perilous encounters were rare or absent at spoken word events, poets remained cognizant of “potential harassment” (Poet 20). For example, when poets performed outside their local scene (e.g., when ‘touring’), the dangers of travelling as visibly queer, non-binary, or transgender were implicated: “The possibility of getting a ride with someone, and then it turns out they’re transphobic, and then you’re in the car with them for eight hours. Right. And you’re just, like,

‘This is horrendous.’... ‘I want to be added to the list of disappeared people...that sounds great.’ (Poet 20). Again, the temporal dimension of the poet’s lifeworld is crucial, as she anticipated “the flow of events” (Ashworth, 2015, p. 27) (i.e., “eight hours”) if she used ride sharing during her travels. The construal of her bodily horizon (Ahmed, 2006) was “bound with the sedimented history of past experiences” (Ashworth, 2015, p. 27) (i.e., “the list of disappeared people”).

Overall, poets considered spoken word a safe space to be out. As one poet said of their local scene: “This is the most queer friendly place you can go” (Poet 15). For this reason, a concrete distinction was made between queer life inside and outside spoken word: “Like nothing in terms of performing poetry because, like, I said it’s, like, that’s the space where you’re safe. But then, out in the real world, it’s not so safe.” (Poet 12). When poets found themselves in new spaces usually unintended for spoken word, it could upset their regular flow of experience. Consequently, poets reappraised their safety and comfort in being *Outspoken*, or in performing poems that could be considered risqué, controversial, or which (inadvertently) required the poet to relive a past emotional experience (Bruner, 1986).

As a fitting example, numerous interviewees reported talking “about trauma in terms of, like, sexual assault” (Poet 18) on stage. What internal struggles did poets grapple with before performing “a poem about sexual assault” (Poet 9)? In what ways did they deliberate their audience’s readiness for the emotional accounts of “being assaulted, or raped or marginalized” (Poet 15)? Before performing a poem that “touched on the topic of rape,” Poet 12 made a careful assessment of her physical surroundings: “One of the venues was a night club... And I didn’t know how to feel about that. Because I was, like, well this is the place where a lot of these things happen” (Poet 12). Moreover, her deliberations were amplified by other “world-constituting,

intentional egos” (Fryer, 2003, p. 154). As the poet continued: “It was a team piece and it talked about different experiences of mine and other poets” (Poet 12). These intersubjective factors led Poet 12 to spin a complex web of significance (Geertz, 1973) when describing her protentive horizon⁸ (Fryer, 2003); that is, the mental gymnastics she performed as she approached the spoken word stage to publicly disclose her private realities.

Poets’ creative responses to their experiences marked by trauma and affliction expose spoken word poetry as a ritual that is rife with social drama (Turner, 1986). As evidence, many poets deemed “being in public and being so open” (Poet 10) a weighty and intense experience: “I’d be, like, nervous by like 3:30 in the afternoon. And the slam isn’t until eight” (Poet 18). How did poets conceptualize this lived experience which had social, artistic, and emotional implications? The analysis will now fasten upon the juncture of “affective experience and social and cultural formations” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 48) in the final theme of ‘queer affliction.’

Chapter 6: Theme 3

6.1 Queer Affliction

The stories people choose to tell tend to “feature difficult passages toward precarious destinations” (Mattingly, 1998, p. 95). As members of marginalized communities, spoken word poets are known to draw on their personal struggles to inspire their work (Chepp, 2012). Many participants from the current research emphasized their plight and abjection (Kristeva, 1982), including feelings of discomfort, pain, and sadness: “I’ve known pain, I’ve known strife” (Poet 4). Some poets also expressed feelings of anger and frustration with their subjugation: “When I’m talking about the way society perceives me, I’m just fed up. I’m angry” (Poet 3). This anger frequently yielded a “crying-out theme” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 141) on stage that was both raw and confrontational (Cvetkovich, 2003): “And sometimes, my queerness in a poem is anger, and it’s pure anger” (Poet 4). As a result, heavy, intense emotions dominated many poets’ artistic repertoire: “I don’t ever write happy poems. I don’t ever write funny poems... Mostly, they’re, like, pretty intense” (Poet 18). “And they’re, like, ‘Oh, what kind of poetry do you write?’ I’m trying to think, like, heavy shit” (Poet 12). “So often it’s, like, kind of heavy” (Poet 19).

Accordingly, sadness and/or emotional agitation were an integral part of the spoken word ritual: “You know when you’re at a poetry event and you’re gonna get sad” (Poet 1). Adjusting to this “affective tone” (Ashworth, 2015, p. 30) was not without challenge for some artists. As Poet 10 said: “Being in a public space talking to strangers about things I deem super personal is, like... I get a nervous vibe from it.” However, through their ongoing participation in these “rituals of affliction” (Turner, 1986, p. 41), poets learned to affirm, explore, and proclaim their suffering on stage: “It’s okay to say these things. Like, talk about the dark parts of you” (Poet 12). “I am ok, to get in that vein, and to be sad and to be vulnerable” (Poet 1). These narratives

echo the idea that collective pain is normative (Kleinman, 2012). Due to its overall intensity, this atmosphere of vulnerability could stretch beyond the timeframe of the event:

So, like, it's good to have that community of, like, checking in on each other and, like, making sure other people are, like, ok and processing shit accordingly. And, like, taking time to fucking breathe after a slam. Because that can be heavy. (Poet 3)

Another participant similarly applied a metaphor of restricted breathing to the ritual of slam, and suggested that successive performances with high emotional content could have a suffocating effect: "There's something to be said for having, having room to breathe" (Poet 16).

Why did poets gravitate toward "intense" and "heavy" artistic manifestations, and what did these cultural expressions mean for their queer subjectivity? As mentioned above, poets' experiences with homo- and transnegativity could become fodder for their artistic works: "So my experiences facing transmisogyny, intersexism, erasure—stuff like that" (Poet 4). "Coming to terms with, transphobia and all this stuff I've been dealing with. Um, and still do deal with" (Poet 15). For example, the varying emotional impressions of one's 'queer omnipresence' (see Theme 2) might be explored:

I also write a lot about my gender and sexuality. Because they are really omnipresent parts of my life. They've led to a lot of violence and they've led to a lot of joy. I am thankful to be agender. I am thankful to be bisexual. Those are things that I deeply value about identity. I wouldn't trade them for the world. Even though they have caused me pain, or have led others to cause me pain. (Poet 9)

Moreover, numerous interviewees celebrated spoken word as a platform to disclose personal experiences with mental illness: "Finding the courage to say that I do suffer from depression and anxiety and all these other things that I never talked about" (Poet 12). For example, Poet 9

invoked their intersectionality as a “mentally ill trans person” and remarked, “I’m not afforded as many spaces to, like, interact with those feelings. And to be listened to. So spoken word is in large part a place where I get to do that” (Poet 9).

Returning to the topic of sexual assault, poets considered spoken word a safe outlet to discuss past experiences in emotionally rich tones: “This is the only time I get to be loud and angry. And, like, not wonder if anything will happen to me in the end” (Poet 12). For example, as a “queer transguy who has a history of sexual assault,” Poet 3 vocally redressed what they regarded as the cultural myth that “only femmes get raped.” According to the poet, it was “really liberating” to perform this *Outspoken* work to “a community that validates my experiences.” Spoken word poets, then, appear to be uniquely positioned to unveil individualized forms of trauma, including those often confined to the private sphere (e.g., sexual abuse) that can go undetected in the public eye (compared to collectively experienced historical events, such as war or genocide) (Cvetkovich, 2003). Moreover, these artistic expressions of trauma were potentially less awkward or thorny than everyday interactions. Poet 11 drew attention to this structural aspect of the art form: “Mental health things that we suffer with and a lot of people socially don’t know how to interact with other people. But you can sit quietly and absorb” (Poet 11).

How did interviewees benefit from writing and performing spoken word poetry that dealt with their trauma and suffering? How did they characterize spoken word as a means of ‘dealing’ with personal strife? These questions feed into a familiar concept and the first subtheme of ‘queer affliction’: namely, ‘catharsis.’ However, because “not all suffering is equal” (Willen, 2010, p. 507), and had to be ‘evaluated’ in the case of a slam, some poets challenged the well-trodden cross-section between catharsis and spoken word. This skepticism will lead the analysis into two other subthemes: ‘trauma sharing’ and ‘painforainment.’ These latter subthemes will be

driven by the pertinent and unresolved question: what are the deeper meanings of having an audience “sit quietly and absorb” (Poet 11) poets’ expressions of pain and suffering?

6.1.1 Subtheme 7: Catharsis

Participants from both the current and prior research have pointed to the therapeutic effects of “creating personal artwork out of emotional pain” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 227). For example, Poet 14 applauded slam poetry’s “economy of language,” and described her profound experiences of “sifting” through “the dark stuff” to find the “true nuggets”: “That forces me to the root of where my anger, my anguish, my confusion is coming from” (Poet 14). Likewise, Poet 12 described her method of dissecting an experience as such: “Like, completely excavate and analyze and then just, like, put it to rest.” Ultimately, poets opined that it should be “healing not only to write but to perform” (Poet 3). Moreover, while poets’ ‘affliction’ narratives could include a longing for normalcy, they also provided “descriptions of empowerment through community” (Becker, 1997, p. 17), as their artistic performances of suffering allowed them to connect with others who had a similar plight. With the collective in mind, those poets who critiqued one-dimensionality in spoken word (see Subtheme 3 and Subtheme 6) attempted to make a unique imprint (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014) with these expressions: “I just don’t, like, just saying, ‘Ahhh shit sucks.’ I say shit sucks in a really weird way” (Poet 17).

In line with colloquial understandings of catharsis, poets pointed to the benefits of writing and performing spoken word poetry as a means of releasing pent up emotion: “If I never talked about it or dealt with that side of me, I would be, like, bottled up and going crazy. Like you need to be able to talk about these things” (Poet 13).

Spoken word poetry means a space for me to say things that I’ve always kept in my head.
And I used to have a really huge problem with bottling up emotions and ignoring

emotions. And then things would get tough and then I would just keep that and cycle with it. (Poet 4)

Interviewees also referred to spoken word as an outlet: “It gave me an outlet in terms of maybe being a more balanced person because it gave me an outlet to express certain things which I think makes me a more healthy person in the rest of my life” (Poet 13). “It wasn’t even about winning. It was just that I had an outlet finally” (Poet 12). As a final example, poets suggested they could purge emotion: “Getting things off my chest and expressing them” (Poet 9).

In a previous psychological study, “a successful slam poem” was one that enabled a “healing encapsulation” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 227). Likewise, interviewees from the current study derived a sense of power from the artistic encapsulation of personal challenges: “I, like, can’t explain to you all of my mental processes but when I find the right sentence, I feel, like, it explains something, you know. And that’s really, really powerful” (Poet 4).

It’s amazing to have something summed up in a nice little package and being able to perform that package and know that you’re not going to send yourself into a spiral by doing it. And it’s a lot of power, and a lot of, like, um, feeling, like, you’ve conquered something. (Poet 16)

These extracts display spoken word’s creative process as therapeutic, purposeful, and emancipatory (Chepp, 2012). Poet 16’s use of “conquered” supports previous research, which called the spoken word poet “a hero of sorts” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 227) when able to encapsulate a painful experience. This process brought about feelings of strength (i.e., “really powerful,” “a lot of power”) and value for interviewees. Poet 16’s idiom of sending “yourself into a spiral” analogizes poets’ commitments to stay on course with their personal project of

living an *Outspoken* existence; however, it also hints at the capacity for poets to become ‘derailed’ by negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviours in the process.

Poets also channelled anger into their art as part of the healing experience: “I’m also, like, trying to challenge myself to write more about love and joy and healing. Like, love and joy and rage and healing. Cuz, I also think anger is incredibly valuable in the healing process” (Poet 9). Likewise, they endeavoured to find a place for their sadness:

And then there’s, like, either something really horrible or something really sad or, like, whatever it is that I’m trying to talk about. And then there’s either the satisfaction at the end of, like, people know that this is good for me because I’m getting it out. Or there’s this, like, resolution at the end of it. (Poet 12)

As seen with a number of these quotes, discourse on finality (e.g., “at the end,” “put it to rest,” “conquered”) was used to convey the benefits of temporal conclusiveness: “Going back to, like, what we said about wrapping something hard and complicated up into a package, and having it be like a vessel to ... [exhales] communicate something really hard and complicated in, like, a concise, artistic way” (Poet 16). This organizing of emotion was valuable for poets’ emotional release and for the communicative power of their poems (Maddalena, 2009).

Poets lauded spoken word’s capacity to alleviate suffering, angst, and confusion: “Like putting coping into your poem. Like, it can be a real gift” (Poet 6). Participants also invoked a local aphorism that equated the art form with a life-saving device: “It’s a phrase that’s been around forever but spoken word saves lives” (Poet 8). “It has the power to save people’s lives. And, like, to heal people. And to connect people. And all these things. Like, it is an incredibly powerful thing to offer them” (Poet 19). Poets applied this life-saving narrative to their own lived experience as well: “I would probably say that, poetry saved my life. Like, poetry has gotten me

through some of the worst things in my life” (Poet 18). “It got me out, out of a really dark place” (Poet 14). Poet 12 explicitly personified spoken word as her therapist:

Poetry has almost been the therapist that has gone back and been, like, ‘Hey.’ Like, it’s been this thing that’s just been pointing out the things that I never realized were really messed up. You know? Or, like, being able to go back into a moment where I wasn’t allowed to talk about something, and then the therapist being, like, ‘Let’s talk about it now.’ But it’s a poem. So I think it’s been a vessel that’s allowed me to go back in time.

True to this therapist analogy, the poet then attempted to remedy her excavated past: “Poetry has been the thing that, like, has held up the flashlight to that moment and been, like, ‘Let’s fix this’” (Poet 12). Interestingly, internal benefits of spoken word could be used to buoy the perceived absence of external impacts (see Subtheme 3): “I can put that in beautiful words, and I can just like celebrate it quietly and it doesn’t necessarily pay my rent, it doesn’t lobby the government, it doesn’t, like, volunteer it’s hours, but it makes me feel better” (Poet 17).

Poets also applied the cathartic benefits of spoken word to: coming out, honing their identities, or discussing queerness in a nuanced fashion (see Subtheme 4): “Spoken word to me is, like, it’s a way to explore the challenging parts of my identity and it really helps me empathize—like show myself empathy” (Poet 4). Some poets specifically vocalized their support of “young queer people, finding their voice” (Poet 11) through spoken word, and commended them for their *Outspoken* performances:

A lot of the time that’s the first time they’re expressing their identity or exploring this identity. Is on stage in front of a whole bunch of people. It’s very, like, raw, very, you know, like, still very fresh, ahh thing. And that’s a beautiful thing to witness. (Poet 19)

Sociality was implicated in ‘catharsis,’ as witnessing “raw” emotional displays was seen as vital to the ritual overall. For example, when dealing with queer relationship issues, one poet garnered an unprecedented sense of solace from sharing her experiences with the ‘queer counter-public’: “Like, here’s my literal sobbing, vulnerability on the microphone and people were just grateful for that. And that, that experience was soooo healing for me. And mind blowing. Like nothing I had ever experienced before” (Poet 11). Thus, a feeling of mutuality could be achieved, where a “grateful” audience could “mirror the experience of the poet, reflecting it back and giving the poet a deep feeling of being known, heard, and valued” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 228).

These social aspects of spoken word as a cathartic exercise were evidenced across the interviews and had crucial significance for poets’ well-being. For example, one poet elucidated aspects of the self that were psychologically significant (e.g., feelings of attachment); aspects that were bolstered by their participation in the spoken word poetry community:

One of the reasons I got into this work was because it kind of countered some of the detachment I had in life. I’m a person who isn’t very outgoing, is more, you know, sits at home, reads, plays video games, keeps to myself. (Poet 13)

This narrative illuminates the ways in which suffering, and the strategies used to alleviate said suffering can be deeply interpersonal (Kleinman, 2012). It follows, then, that poets forged human connection and combated social suffering (Das, Kleinman, & Lock, 1996) through spoken word:

I used to be super shy and, like, wasn’t very good at meeting people. And now I’m, like, if I can get on stage and do this, like, it’s fine I can do a lot more. I feel I can talk to people easier. Like, I used to have really bad social anxiety. (Poet 18)

Thus, even if psychic pain (Cvetkovich, 2003) (e.g., “social anxiety”) is seen as contained within an individual body, its manifestation will have social and, thus, broader implications.

In prior research, cathartic release was a “unanimous tenet that resounded through all interviews” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 266). While this finding was reflected in the current research, it was not uniformly celebrated. Many poets cautioned that spoken word artists need to consider the audience’s “emotional stamina” (Poet 20), as Poet 20 continued: “No matter how onboard people are with your message, there’s a certain amount of, like, physical exhaustion, that comes from, heavy intense emotions.” The compulsion to use spoken word cathartically, without “a conscious effort to gain understanding, to contemplate solutions, and, finally, to move on from moments of stress” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 267) was positioned as artistic malpractice: “But the point isn’t to come and unload” (Poet 7). Some poets even applied the term “dangerous” to this perceived mismanagement of emotion in spoken word:

A lot of people, um, forget that it is a performance I think and kind of use it as, um, a cathartic exercise or something where they’re trying to heal, um, via performing poetry [speaking cautiously], and I find that’s a dangerous place to be when you’re performing. Because it is a performance. (Poet 16)

I’ve sort of looked back on my earlier involvement in slam and I was, like, oh some of that was really, like, cathartic or therapeutic. Which I think is a really beautiful thing.

About art and about sharing your art. And it can also be a really dangerous thing. Because

I think that often people don’t realize how much they impact their audience. (Poet 19)

These poets emphasized the intersubjective nature of a performance; as such, they were cognizant of the impact of their artistic works: “Be responsible with your words. Words are so powerful” (Poet 14). Participants strongly criticized poets who were unduly ‘forceful’ in their writing and performance: “Like, you cannot leave your audience also feeling raped. You cannot also leave your audience feeling beaten to a pulp. You can’t leave your audience feeling, like,

they just had their heart ripped out of their chest” (Poet 8). Discursively speaking, numerous interviewees resorted to these idioms of combat (e.g., “beaten to a pulp”) in order to stress their concern with some of their peers’ emotional negligence, bordering on violence: “You can make people feel things and recognize things, without, like, beating them up. We take care of each other” (Poet 14). These forceful metaphors reveal the stylistic strategies employed by poets who underscored the moral and ethical task of audience caretaking. Thus, it was suggested that some cathartic poetry was better left *unspoken*: “Keep that in your journal though” (Poet 14). “Because it will leave people shell shocked” (Poet 20).

This positioning stirs up a number of substantive questions: How do performance art and catharsis interact? Could poets find a balance between the two in order ‘protect’ themselves and their audience? And, lastly, were emotional stage expressions as perilous for audience members as the poets cautioned? These stage dilemmas, and more, will be probed and explored in the final subthemes of the analysis.

6.1.2 Subtheme 8: Trauma sharing

The ephemerality of trauma – as unspeakable and undefinable affect – resists conventional forms of documentation (Cvetkovich, 2003). Invisible aspects of trauma have given rise to new forms of cultural expression, such as public rituals, performances, and testimonies, which are sustained through collective activity. By opening up trauma discourse to include anything from catastrophic events to moments of everyday emotional distress (Cvetkovich, 2003), any public performance that grapples with the affective consequences of past events can be inspected for its cultural significance as a ritual of affliction. According to Cvetkovich (2003), to take a queer perspective on trauma is to appreciate the creative responses to it. It follows, then,

that the “sharing of misery” at queer gatherings (Ahmed, 2006, p. 104) is a phenomenon ripe with historical, cultural, and social meaning.

A number of poets were explicit in their tendency to bring trauma to the stage: “I have a lot of poems that are about trauma” (Poet 3). “I also do a lot pieces around trauma, abuse, healing from that” (Poet 9). “I talk about trauma in terms of, like, sexual assault” (Poet 18). “My stuff is really personal. It’s about, yeah, queerness and gender and family and trauma” (Poet 19). Building on the previous concept of ‘catharsis,’ the discourse surrounding ritualistic trauma performances revealed an unconventional form of stage ‘therapy’: as performers could ‘share’ their trauma with an audience who ‘receives’ it. This interpretation clearly expands conventional understandings of therapy as a medicalized and privatized encounter between clinician and client. Effectively, some artists positioned spoken word as both “cultural production and therapy” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 10). As one poet remarked: “When people think about poetry, they’re, like, ‘Now I can finally do this story about this trauma that happened’” (Poet 6).

For some poets, spoken word offered a unique and unprecedented platform to share their trauma: “Poetry gives you an amazing format for you to be honest without having to be, like, ‘I want to talk straight to you and tell you all about all my trauma’” (Poet 3). Here, the poet was able to use spoken word to marry the oblique (i.e., non-“straight”) angle of queer (Ahmed, 2006) with psychic pain (Cvetkovich, 2003). Indeed, some poets considered trauma sharing a rising trend of the queer counter-public: “When people talk about queerness, it gets rooted in a lot of trauma” (Poet 6). Poet 6 applied a metaphor of a “lifeboat” to these rituals, which conveyed the urgency behind these traumatic expressions overall: “Especially when it’s, like, ‘This is my trauma and this is my trauma’ and, like, here I’m putting it out on you to, like, offer these little life boats” (Poet 6). The idea of mutual trauma sharing was further developed by Poet 3:

Because, like, working through your history, working through your trauma, through art, and then, like, showing it to other people and other people sharing theirs with you is, like, ‘Woah, I am not the only one who deals with this, I’m not the only one who deals with this type of trauma, I’m not the only one who experienced this.

Trauma sharing, then, could hold worth as a community building mechanism: “If someone goes up there and shares a traumatic experience. That’s a community building, hopefully, a community building thing. Um and as much as there’s issues with so much of that, it’s telling stories” (Poet 15). Thus, in contrast to the individualized approaches common to clinical psychology, at spoken word events, trauma became a collective experience that generated a collective response (Cvetkovich, 2003). These affective messages were seen as a vital, albeit contested (“there’s issues with so much of that”), ingredient of the queer counter-public.

The act of trauma sharing on stage had led to conversations among subcultural members throughout the greater spoken word community: “There’s a lot of discussions happening right now in spoken word about, ah, trauma. And how we’re bringing trauma to the stage” (Poet 6). The “issues” with trauma sharing, to quote Poet 15 from above, regarded the conundrum of how to effectively bring trauma to the stage in a way that was “healing” for all involved: “Often people write a trauma poem but I don’t want to write a trauma poem, I want to write a poem about the beauty and healing in my trauma” (Poet 8). “So many people, like, bring their trauma to the stage, and I think that’s important, and I think that’s healing, but it’s also... Um but it’s also, like, not what I’m trying to do” (Poet 17). Though potentially “healing,” interviewees’ declarations to avoid performing “a trauma poem” allude to its bad subcultural reputation.

How did Poet 8 distinguish between “a trauma poem” and “a poem about the beauty and healing” in trauma? What was considered ineffective trauma sharing? A core critique of trauma

poems was their lack of creativity and artfulness: “A lot of young poets these days are like: this is the most obvious metaphor; this is my most direct trauma; this is basically just retelling exactly what happened to me” (Poet 5). Likewise, Poet 15 saw the kinship of trauma among queer poets lead to “a specific kind of pain and suffering” (Wilén, 2010, p. 515) on stage:

Trauma, trauma, trauma, trauma, trauma, trauma, trauma. Um. And I don’t think, I think a lot of it I think is only marginally artful. Right? Like, it’s, it’s usually performed very passionately, which I guess there’s some art in that. A lot of the writing I don’t find particularly interesting, or artful. It’s very typical, trope-filled, cliché-filled, you know, ah, you know, how many different flowery ways can you talk about this and that.

Thus, many interviewees had grown exceedingly weary (in Poet 15’s case, to the multiple of seven) of trauma-related performances in spoken word. As one interviewee complained: “All the poems are, like, about trauma” (Poet 1). This high frequency of trauma-related poetry at spoken word led one interviewee (who had toured widely) to marvel at a non-“traumatizing stage” (Poet 8), which appeared to lack traumatic content and/or ensuing social drama: “I’ve never heard them have to do a trigger warning, like a blanket trigger warning at the beginning, I’ve never seen somebody leave viscerally upset” (Poet 8).

Why had ‘trauma poems’ become so popular? In the case of slam poetry, interviewees suggested that poets might perform trauma poems because: “when it comes down to scores. That stuff gets privileged. With scores. All the time. Right. Like almost all the time” (Poet 15).

“Nobody is going to be, like, ‘Oh man, your trauma is a six-point-five.’ Like, you’re going to get points, it’s a very easy way to get points. Um, I think which is part of why people do it” (Poet 7).

This ill-reputed subcultural phenomenon was colloquially referred to as the “trauma Olympics” (Poet 20), which led many interviewees to proclaim a disenchantment with slam:

There's, like, no happy poems there's, like, not any experimental poems to the extent where, yeah, poets would do the poems and then they would have to go have a panic attack afterwards because they're stressing themselves out so much to win this fucking poetry slam! (Poet 1)

It just keeps like showing up and people are, like, 'Uhh trauma.' And I'm like, 'Ah! God why are you re-traumatizing yourself and you're traumatizing the rest of us with it! Like why is this productive? This isn't art!' Yeah and it's, like, shitty too because it's competition. It's a competition art form. (Poet 7)

This discourse aligns trauma sharing with a tragic tactic of survival (James, 2010), in which poets "market their suffering" (Willen, 2010, p. 517) as a kind of currency in the game of slam.

From the perspective of those who had shared their trauma publicly on stage, another concern revolved around the social ramifications. As Poet 3 said:

A lot of the times when you do a trauma poem people are going to come up to you and be like, 'Hey, I had the same thing and then they like go off about their own experiences' and like 'Ok, I don't need your trauma on me too.'

Poet 3 conveyed the magnitude of the trauma sharing ritual here, as they felt ill-equipped to take on the additional weight of another's trauma when in a vulnerable mental and emotional state: "I'm like 'Ok, that's cool, but I don't need your rape story in my brain right now'" (Poet 3). This account highlights the precarious nature of trauma sharing in an intersubjective arena, which also had far-ranging implications for the queer counter-public:

She's a queer woman of colour and most of her team was queer and white and, like, most of the people following her around were, like, young white queers. And, like, she spent most of that week just, like, dealing with their sadness and feelings and their trauma, and

doing all of that emotional labour and, like, [not] be given any space to, like, have that reciprocated. (Poet 7)

Poet 7's three-part list (i.e., "sadness," "feelings," "trauma") was a discursive tactic used to emphasize her concern with the heavy emotion surrounding 'queer affliction.' By casting a disparaging light on the process (i.e., "emotional labour"), this account challenges the idea that slam poets have "increased self-esteem and meaningful relationships with a newfound peer group" (Maddalena, 2009, p. 226). True to the concept of a social drama, poets may have shared "something in common" (Maddalena, 2009, p. 228), such as their gender and sexual identities or mental health concerns, but this did not preclude "clashes of character" (Turner, 1986, p. 39).

This preponderance of trauma expressions and the resultant social drama led Poet 7 to chastise a focus on sadness in spoken word, which was particularly acute at higher-stake slams:

'Hey, dude! Ah, I see that you're sad. And I don't want to disrespect that. But! Ahhhh go home or something. Like don't put this on the rest of us. Get your support systems. Better [yet]. Ask first before you make people support you. Don't guilt them into supporting you cuz we'll fucking do it. Umm if you're falling apart we're not going to leave you falling apart.' But, like, not everybody gets their feelings hurt and then immediately falls apart, and if you're in a place where somebody saying something is going to make you a literal puddle on the floor you probably aren't healthy to be here. Like, you probably shouldn't have come. Like, go to therapy, dude. Like, see a psychiatrist. Like, I'm medicated. Are you not medicated?' Like the rest of us are doing a lot of work to be healthy enough to be here.

In this extract, individualized therapy and treatment are emphasized over "collective and social forms of recovery" (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 31). For example, Poet 7 universalized the

“contemporary zeal for pharmacological treatment of depression” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 31) (i.e., “Like, I’m medicated. Are you not medicated?”). This narrative speaks to the culture of spoken word more broadly; namely, that it contains mentally frail people – about as stable as a “puddle on the floor” – many of whom were unfit to participate in emotionally intense rituals of affliction. This account provides a sharp departure – in fact, perpendicular (i.e., horizontal “puddle” vs. vertical “backbone”) – from prior research, which saw the “new family” attained through spoken word to provide the “backbone of stable, meaningful living” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 228). While this prior research suggested that the positive relationships poets formed at spoken word could buffer against the psychological distress of re-experiencing emotion due to trauma, the current analysis throws new light on the phenomenon.

Indeed, according to Poet 7, there were serious ramifications of trauma sharing, both for the poet performing and those in attendance:

I had to fucking call my fucking psychiatrist as soon as I got home. Like, I had to call so many people that whole week. Just being, like, ‘Somebody hold me. This is, like, so heavy’; like, who has space for how heavy this is?

Poets were alarmed by the groundswell of “really heavy, traumatic, serious poetry” (Poet 15) on spoken word stages, particularly because the audience is “participating as a designated part of the therapy experience” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 227). It is crucial to ask: what was the audience’s experience of ‘trauma sharing’? Were they willing and able to make space for the performance of “heavy poems, heavy poems, heavy poems” (Poet 20)? In spoken word, is there a distinction to be made between cultural expressions and performances designed for outsiders, as opposed to those designed for the poets themselves (Bruner, 1986), or are the two intertwined? These questions will be addressed in the final subtheme of queer affliction.

6.1.3 Subtheme 9: Painfotainment

Verbal art performances, such as spoken word poetry, avoid “overly abstract, academic, or emotionless” (Chepp, 2012, p. 234) expressions and, instead, focus on the task of entertainment. Regarding the game of slam, poets who do not connect psychologically and emotionally with their audience are unlikely to make it to later rounds (Aptowicz, 2009; Dillard, 2002). Researchers of slam have emphasized the ways poets must create work that is relatable to the audience. However, what exactly does “catalyzing a forum for shared experience” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 263) entail? Are there alternative interpretations of the spoken word ritual that challenge the idea that there is a “reciprocal relationship between the audience and the poet” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 265)?

As mentioned, interviewees reported an increasing incidence of trauma performances, and were particularly concerned that slam judges tended to privilege these expressions with high scores (i.e., the trauma Olympics): “The more you experienced horrible, horrible things in life, the more advantage you are to talk about those things, you do well in slam. Which is totally fucked. Like completely fucked up” (Poet 15). With this understanding in mind, some slam poets attempted to ‘afflict’ the hearts of their listeners with rhetorical expressions of pain and suffering: “If you’re trying to get paid, then you’re a spoken word artist. If you’re trying to break hearts then you’re a slam poet” (Poet 5). “You have to tug at the heartstrings of five random people” (Poet 9). One poet extended this line of thought and brought queer aspects into focus:

I do love poems about my girlfriend and I get, like, eights and, like, I do poems about my community and I get eights, and then I do poems where I talk about the most traumatic experiences of my life and I get tens and it’s, like, – I love those poems – but it kind of

forces queer people to bring out the hardest things that they've ever faced in order to attempt to make it in the scene. (Poet 4)

Thus, a successful technique in the game of slam was for (queer) poets to root their work in lived experiences of trauma while “tapping into emotional gut reactions” (Chepp, 2012, p. 234), or what one participant succinctly referred to as “that gut place” (Poet 14).

While reasonable to assume the judges held compassion for, or sympathized with, poets' suffering, leading them to score trauma performances highly, an alternative reading is that the audience 'enjoyed' these kinds of performances. From this vantage, judges rewarded trauma pieces with high scores for their entertainment value, a phenomenon that was colloquially referred to as “trauma porn” (Poet 4). This discourse was based upon the commodification of suffering (James, 2010). In this sense, ‘trauma sharing’ takes on a new meaning, though one still riddled with shameful and sinful connotations. According to Poet 4, “queer poets often fall into” this trap and, thus, some interviewees actively tried to overcome it by injecting positivity into their artworks. For example, looking at the evolution of their spoken word poetry, Poet 9 said, “As opposed to what I used to do, which was write a lot of trauma pieces that didn't really necessarily have an empowering ending.”

How did poets distinguish between ‘trauma sharing’ and ‘trauma porn,’ and why was the latter constructed as particularly taboo? For one reason, ‘painfotainment’ (Carlin, 2018) was cast as incompatible with aforementioned social justice and anti-oppression motivations (see Theme 1): “It should be survival and not glorification” (Poet 17). This glorification was considered an “issue” within the community: “There's a huge issue, like, also in slam of people, to some degree, romanticising trauma. It's, like, ‘Oh, well, if I'm hurt, more than you're hurt, then I'm going to get more points’” (Poet 17). Rather than “rewarding poets for having a self-view of

health” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 230), some queer poets felt they were indirectly encouraged to hyperbolize their pain and suffering on stage:

Poet 4: I have to be, like, my entire existence is being destroyed. You’re clawing away at my soul. I need to make sure 100%. It’s almost as if—

Elly-Jean: The gravity of the situation is communicated—

Poet 4: — I have to prove to these people that my pain is valid.

Poet 4’s use of “these people” distinguishes herself from her audience, and the term “prove” indicates that she was, to some extent, at their mercy. In effect, she positioned the audience as a Foucauldian bio-power: a force that promotes well-being but, ultimately, through mechanisms of control, sustains queer subjugation. Thus, queer poets, like Poet 4, were “implicitly required to perform their suffering” (James, 2010, p. 482) in order for the audience to recognize their trauma. Dramatic tones and topics were “packaged convincingly” (Willen, 2010, p. 507) (“make sure 100%”) in order to ‘validate’ poets’ pain.

This finding gives pause to previous claims that poets are defining “old traumas in new terms” and finding ways to “write themselves into the stories that they want to live” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 230). Rather, in this drama narrative of “troubled time” (Mattingly, 1998, p. 95), the experience of suffering was paramount: there was a significant gap between where the poet was and where she desired to be. As the poet continued: “It’s so often that happy-queer poems score so much lower than unhappy queer poems” (Poet 4). As a result, she observed queer artists were “not doing the poems that are, like, confident about their gender. It seems the poems about people being confused and afraid ... score higher than people being confident and happy” (Poet 4). Poetic discourse which projected a “weak or failed state” (James, 2010, p. 484) (i.e., “confused and afraid”) ranked highly in the “local hierarchy of suffering” (Willen, 2010, p. 512).

Some interviewees were perturbed by performers who glorified their trauma. But a key question is how did the poets interpret the *audience's* emotional voyeurism (Carlin, 2018)? Poet 6 used a discourse of “feeding” to depict the audience’s role in ‘queer affliction’:

A lot of times when people speak about queerness, um, they’ll lose—when you add a judge to that, they might not talk about their joys as a queer person because the judges and the audience really do reward and it’s this feeding thing that happens.

This unidirectional feeding concept – which dichotomizes the ritual into a ‘feeder’ (i.e., performer) and those being ‘fed’ (i.e., audience) – discursively contests the idea that poets have mutuality (Maddalena, 2009) or a reciprocal relationship (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014) with the audience. It also troubles the idea that poets are “using the medium as an active coping mechanism” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 267), as some *Outspoken* artists may have prioritized “feeding” the audience over practicing self-care. Poet 3 endorsed this perspective and criticized the audience’s role in this queer ritual of affliction:

Because people feed off trauma. And identities are fueled by trauma, and they think that—a lot of judges think that, um, simply existing as queer, as trans, is hard. And sometimes it is, but, like, they think that it’s this big hardship that me living though, just being fucking queer, is, like, a hardship that they need to give me points for.

Again, Foucault’s concept of bio-power is useful to explain slam judges’ allocation of points in place of the poet’s “weak or failed state” (James, 2010, p. 484). In this sense, judges were positioned as “trauma brokers” (p. 490) who supply points to queer poets’ “trauma portfolio” (p. 484) (“big hardship”).

While researchers have applauded the capacity of spoken word poetry to “improve [poets’] psychological health” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 265) when common ground was

found with their audience, queer ‘painfotainment’ expressions appear to derail this quixotic narrative. This is not to deny any therapeutic aspects of queer rituals of affliction, nor is it to deny the audience’s connection with the poet’s suffering; rather, this finding offers an alternative reading of the phenomenon in terms of “motive, deed, and consequence” (Mattingly, 1998, p. 29). In the case of the poet, making oneself vulnerable through direct metaphors and non-gilded words had ‘painfotainment’ value over that of “unification” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 265): “A lot of young poets these days are like: this is the most obvious metaphor, this is my most direct trauma, this is basically just retelling exactly what happened to me” (Poet 5), “I know that it gets you more points to re-traumatize yourself, to, like, write a poem that’s really explicit and really hard hitting and really, like: this is what happened to me” (Poet 3). In the case of the audience, it appeared that some members did not feel burdened by the “poets’ emotional baggage” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 267); on the contrary, they were ‘hungry’ for it: “Because people feed off trauma” (Poet 3). This rendering was absent from prior research, and challenges the idea that spoken word is “a little heavy to be pure entertainment” (Poet 13).

What, then, are the meanings and significances of this “heavy” form of entertainment? A unique “vernacular of poetry slams” (Dolan, 2006, p. 169), which helped to portray poets’ performance of pain and suffering, was the expression “shedding blood on stage” (Poet 9). This figurative discourse – which speaks to the gory fascination with “wound culture” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 15; Seltzer, 1998) – held taboo connotations and tended to incite social drama: “Yeah, the trauma thing. There’s a whole ...there’s a lot of privilege that goes into taking up space with trauma and, like, what we call bleeding on the stage” (Poet 7). Predictably, shedding blood on stage was commonly seen at higher-stake slam competitions: “The national level is sometimes painful for me. Because it’s just, you know, slit my wrists, cut my throat” (Poet 15). “I feel like

we're forced to rip out, like, our insides and share it to have any hope of, like, winning" (Poet 4). These descriptions of "victimage and bodily violation" (Seltzer, 1998, p. 280) are in sync with the idea that judges 'fed' off performers' emotional trauma.

Despite the audience 'feeding' off queer trauma, commitments to audience caretaking remained a centerpiece of poets' lifeworld: "If I'm shedding blood on stage; like, shedding trauma on stage. It's not hurting me; it hurts the audience. And I need to be responsible for that. And be careful with my audience" (Poet 9). As such, Poet 9 dichotomized 'bleeding' and 'building' on stage: "And that sort of ties in with that idea of responsibility to the audience because I'm not looking to stand up there and bleed anymore, I'm looking to stand up there and, like, build something." This bifurcation would suggest the poet considered bleeding wholly unconstructive for both the poet and their community. In another instance, participant and researcher co-created a script on metaphorical blood shedding, with the poet maintaining her care for the audience when she shared emotional trauma. Elly-Jean: "Mmhmm it's like, if you're going to bleed on stage—" Poet 12: "Yeah, then let's clean up after and let me tell you that I'm fine." Elly-Jean: "Let me do some sutures [overlapping]—"

This finding begs the question: why did the audience need protection from something they were 'feeding' off? It is possible spoken word audiences do not necessarily need protection from heavy, intense emotions. In fact, these types of emotions could be the very reason audience members craved the spoken word poetry experience in the first place. To gain a better sense of this 'feeding' phenomenon from the audience's perspective, one poet remarked on her overwhelming initial experience as an audience member: "It was just pummelling almost. With the words and emotions" (Poet 11). Although this ritual of affliction was emotionally intense (i.e., "pummelling"), she cast it in a positive light:

My poor little brain could not even process all the things it was hearing. As the next thing was being delivered. And, like, I literally almost felt, I don't want to use the word assaulted, but it was, like, that sort of a feeling of so many things coming at me at once, I couldn't process all of it. And I didn't want to leave. Like, I just wanted more of it.

Because Poet 11 intentionally pursued the emotional intensity that is common to spoken word poetry, it is reasonable to suggest others had as well. It is critical to ask, then: Had the audience become a “discursive blank canvas” (Willen, 2010, p. 513) upon which some interviewees projected their own morals and emotions? If not the audience's well-being, what was at stake when queer poets shed blood on stage?

The analysis suggests the micropolitics of social relations (Kleinman, 1995) among queer counter-public members were at stake: “There's, like, a lot of resentment now in the community around, like, queerness because there's sooo much queer trauma this year. Just, like, so much” (Poet 7). As a result, poets had begun to brainstorm ways to diminish a surplus of queer trauma. For example, Poet 16 advocated for “having your experiences and traumas be something that you have a separation from. And kind of educating folks on, like, how to get to that place, before you slam.” Indeed, the ‘bad’ subcultural reputation of ‘painfotainment’ led to a collective appeal for queer poets to edit the heaviness out of their work:

I think that, like, often queer spoken word poets are encouraged, either, like, literally by people or just by thoughts in their head, are encouraged to water down their poetry. And are encouraged to, like, ‘Ok. I know this is your story and it's really heavy and it's true but, like, you know, you want people to actually listen to it.’ (Poet 4)

This account provides key contextualization to queer affliction, as it demonstrates the ways the audience was used as a justification for the manipulation (i.e., “water down”) of particular messages (i.e., “really heavy”) queer poets shared on stage.

According to interviewees, “young queer poets” (Poet 16) were a likely demographic to shed blood on stage. Thus, “the influx of really young poets. Like poets who are 15, 16” (Poet 16) in spoken word was used to explain the rise in trauma sharing. For example, Poet 15 provided a dialogical account of a “tragically young” (Poet 15) queer artist who performed a spoken word poem about this subcultural phenomenon: “The whole thing was all about bleeding on stage. And sharing our trauma. Basically, insinuated that that was the point of slam.” Akin to other interviewees, Poet 15 was dismayed that spoken word had become virtually synonymous with a queer ritual of affliction: “I was horrified. Because I was, like, ‘No.’ You can share trauma. And you should. But that’s not what it’s about. This is about making art. That’s what this is about” (Poet 15). As touched on above, Poet 7 was also vexed when the vulnerable expressions of “young White queers” took centre stage:

It’s very detrimental to the entire community but, like, how do you say that to an 18-year-old girl? How do you be, like, I love and respect you but you should go home. Like, you shouldn’t be here. It’s not that you don’t belong here, it’s not that you’re not welcome, but, like, you have to take care of yourself.

These anecdotes provide a dramatic reminder of the “local power relations in the pragmatics of narrative” (Good, 1994, p. 160). They speak to *who* had the authority to articulate expressions of trauma, *when* they were socially acceptable to perform, and *how* poets were expected to construct these stories, as they belonged not to the individual but to the community: “When you say the thing out loud, it’s no longer for you. It’s for everybody in the room” (Poet 14).

Previous research (e.g., Maddalena, 2009) made a distinction between spoken word and therapy, where the impetus for participating in the former was to express oneself artistically, with any health promoting results a pleasant and unanticipated side effect. Poet 15 echoed these claims: “It doesn’t matter if the art is about making pancakes, or being assaulted. It should be about making art” (Poet 15). But participants from my study suggested that many poets were: “using slam, as therapy. Because they can’t afford therapy” (Poet 16). Poets were concerned with the impacts of trauma-related performances, both for younger queer-identified individuals and the greater collective. As such, queer ‘blood shedding’ had a crucial “dialogical and intersubjective quality” (Good, 1994, p. 158):

I think it’s pretty hazardous to, like, have in the community, ahm, and because it’s, like, slam is a place where young queer folks [with trauma and shit?] can come and speak about that shit! Like, it very quickly becomes a very dangerous place to be. Ah, and, like, not a place that’s conducive to healing. (Poet 16)

This account harks back to the ‘negative’ aspects of *Outspoken* expression and using spoken word cathartically: “especially people like young poets who come in and this is, maybe, their only safe space to be queer. This is their time to, like, get it off their chest” (Poet 17).

While spoken word is designed to be a “non-pathologized, social environment” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 226), its use as “slamtherapy” (de Bruijn & Oudenhuijsen, 2021) was apparent in the current study. As a result, Poet 16 lobbied for there to be “a mental health professional in slam communities.” Poets suggested that the ‘negativity’ surrounding trauma performances could partially explain why there were “a lot of ill queer people” (Poet 4) in the queer counter-public. These ‘painfotainment’ aspects of trauma performances align with a theory of lumpen abuse, with queer poets as a “lumpenized” (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009, p. 197)

minority social group. While interviewees could have interpreted queer poets as having “creative agency” (p. 242) via their expressions of trauma (e.g., by catalyzing new forms of ‘treatment’), they were instead cast as an ‘unhealthy’ residual class that had succumbed to structural adjustments and systems of power (i.e., the institution of slam poetry): “It’s just very hard to be, like, ‘We should let queer people take up a ton of space’ when they show up and do that in such unhealthy ways” (Poet 7).

However, as Poet 15 noted above: “You can share trauma. And you should.” Poets did not wish to abandon the *Outspoken* mission to “go to some pretty harsh places” (Poet 6), but they maintained the importance of “artful” (Poet 15) trauma poems that contained a “silver lining” (Poet 17) or “at least a little hope, a little elevation” (Poet 13). Participants were virtually unanimous that (trauma) poetry should follow “the standard emotional arc” (Poet 20): “We’re sharing pain, but we should be carrying hope, at the end of it” (Poet 15). “So most of my poems end with love or at least a little bit of hope.” (Poet 3) “Start kind of, like, funny and sweet and get darker and darker, and deeper and darkest, and then go back out on, like, a nice take-home positive message” (Poet 20). With their audiences in mind, poets found a central place of hope for the future and care in the present: this method provided the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel (Mattingly, 1998).

Poets were resolute in their roles as audience caretakers. In assuming this role, poets positioned ‘painfotainment’ as taboo/sinful and rejected any worth it might have as a curative ritual. This construction is in tune with prior research, which has suggested there is an “expectation of health on the part of the judges” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 227). In short, expressions of suffering without any positivity were positioned as an ineffective slam technique:

It's really hard for the audience to— the judges, to get into a poem that is all sad. You can do it. It still can be done. But it will always, or almost always, work better if there's a note of hope. And it doesn't have to be much but it has to be there. (Poet 9)

However, a critical analysis of the current data did not confirm “all sad” poems to have this issue. While there may be “unspoken expectations on the part of the audience that their experience will overall be one of *enjoyment*” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 227, emphasis added), what the audience considers enjoyable is still up for interpretation. If spectators enjoyed queer poets’ “skillful and strategic representations of their experiences of suffering and trauma” (Wilén, 2010, p. 517), it might say something about the “voyeuristic culture of spectacle,” the “pathological public sphere,” and a fascination with “wound culture” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 15). This notion brings the analysis back to Poet 7’s mournful question: “Who has space for how heavy this is?” For while this is a poignant query, there is reason to believe that some spoken word poetry attendees did have space – in fact, an emotional craving – for “heavy” performances.

Chapter 7: Integrated Discussion

Through the recursive analytical process, *Outspoken* gained superordinate status (Smith & Osborn, 2008) as this multifaceted concept was at the heart of all other findings. Participants from this study used spoken word poetry to boldly communicate a queer sexual orientation and/or gender identity that deviates from the norm and, in doing so, demonstrably resisted “the force of compulsory heterosexuality” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 94). These verbal acts of authenticity (Nielsen & Alderson, 2014) included a wide range of expression, which could mobilize poets’ ability to forge connections with other queer-identified poets. The numerous salutary effects of being *Outspoken* included: confidence building, countering invisibilities, and tackling homo- and transnegativity. Moreover, spoken word could provide poets with “training grounds for agitational activities” (Fraser, 1992, p. 124) directed toward the wider public.

As Warner (2002, p. 86) stated: “[in the] queer counter-public, no one is in the closet.” This idea was reflected in the current analysis, with the ‘convergence’ of numerous queer-identified artists and queer-specific initiatives at spoken word. Counter-publics are also distinguished by a special idiom for social reality (Fraser, 1992; Warner, 2002) that circulates among members. In the current study, this terminology included: *queer*, *ambiguity*, *binary*, *structure*, and *fluidity*. This idiom displays friction against the dominant public, as it was used to develop members’ oppositional identities, interests, and needs (Warner, 2002). Moreover, because queer could take on different meanings and dimensions depending on the particular poet’s desires and practices, poets capitalized on a rare opportunity for nuanced queer expression in these artistic social spaces. This ‘queer omnipresence’ at spoken word led poets to ‘explorations’ of their identities, including their unique experiences with queer ‘liminalities.’ Even those patently *Outspoken* poets, whose ‘rhetoric’ ostensibly aligned with counter-public

oppositional politics, at times revealed liminal aspects of themselves. This probing of the deeper crevices of poets' identities revealed the "oblique angle of queer" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 162) and a subjunctive mood, which were indicative of poets' strong conviction to be reflexive and to do justice to the "totality of the person, 'warts and all'" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 54).

Poets also faced invariable 'quandaries' and 'constraints' by living an *Outspoken* existence. For example, some queer counter-public members' resolute "political action in the face of a repressive binary gender regime" (Fryer, 2003, p. 149) was, at times, "theoretically and politically detrimental" (p. 140) as this particular form of *Outspoken* praxis could lead to exclusionary politics and artistic atrophy. Similarly, a hyper-focus on queerness could constrain or pigeonhole poets' artistic expressions. As "objective fragments," political alignment among subcultural members and a queer focus could be regarded as social achievements; however, with the broader "cultural configuration" (Good, 1994, p. 33) in view, these traits took on fundamentally different, and more complicated, meaning. Hence, a critical probing of numerous lifeworld features, such as sociality, spatiality, and mood as atmosphere (Ashworth, 2015), proved crucial to a deeper understanding of poets' lifeworld.

Thus, the capacity for spoken word to incite social change was positioned, at times, as dubious, if not delusional. This critique counters prevailing narratives and research on spoken word, which has tended to highlight spoken word artists' ability to revolutionize and emancipate (e.g., Alvarez & Mearns, 2014; Aptowicz, 2009; Chepp, 2012; Schoppelrei, 2019). However, it does align with the idea of a 'utopian performative,' which by definition, "can't translate into a programme for social action, because it's most effective as a *feeling*" (Dolan, 2006, p. 170, emphasis is original). Much like counter-public theory, utopian performatives appear to "supply different ways of *imagining* stranger-sociability" (Warner, 2002, pp. 87-88, emphasis added),

which do not necessarily have a place or purpose beyond social and cultural imagination, that is – like hermeneutics – fundamentally ambiguous (Ricoeur, 1991).

As *Outspoken* artists, poets needed to recognize their three-dimensional world and grasp it as paradoxical (Crotty, 1998); that is, by virtue of their hypervisibility on stage in a public setting, they needed to break with familiar understandings of experience (i.e., a presumed level of safety and lack of vigilance). In this sense, poets made sense of their lived experiences as an “open circuit” (Ahmed, 2006), and called into question what was taken for granted. Some ‘constraints’ of queer omnipresence occurred on the “protentive horizon” (Fryer, 2003, p. 154) of poets’ temporal arena, for example when they carefully assessed their spatial surroundings prior to the public disclosure of “love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more that are part of the vibrancy of queer cultures” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7). ‘Constraints’ also occurred on poets’ “retentive horizon” (Fryer, 2003, p. 154); that is, with intentional consciousness directed towards that which was no longer before them (e.g., after a performance). By focusing on the invariant structures of poets’ lifeworld (e.g., temporality), new understandings of the lived experience began to take shape. For example, in previous research, poets reported feelings of relief (i.e., Maddalena, 2009) and release (i.e., Alvarez & Mearns, 2014) after an emotional spoken word performance, but when pushed “toward a radically reflective understanding of the essential, transcendental structures” (Fryer, 2003, p. 155) that underlie *Outspoken* poets’ experience, a far more complex picture emerged.

To this end, the social and psychological implications of writing and performing emotionally charged and painful *Outspoken* poetry were crucial. Many poets aligned these performances with the familiar concept of ‘catharsis,’ as poets could prevent “unhealthy psychological practices, such as rumination and passive coping” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p.

267) by sharing ‘heavy’ artistic works with others. While healing benefits were conveyed, so too were the individual and collective risks of ‘queer affliction.’ One critique of ritualistic and recurrent traumatic expressions links to the ‘quandaries’ of the queer counter-public: that the cultural production suffered (i.e., was less diverse and artistically rich). However, a more resounding concern revolved around the ability and propensity for queer poets to ‘afflict’ both themselves and their audiences with expressions of pain and suffering. Interviewees suggested that some poets were emotionally ill-equipped to share their trauma; moreover, because “there is no designated therapist or facilitator to watch over participants and to help them process difficult feelings upon exposure of themselves, poets depended on their ‘slam family’” (Maddalena, 2009, p. 226) for emotional support. While unproblematized in prior research, this ‘dependency’ was harshly criticized by some interviewees, as social drama could ensue in the aftermath of public ‘trauma sharing.’

The significance of collective *Outspoken* expression was clearly evidenced, as poets could derive a sense of mutuality (Maddalena, 2009) and a reciprocal relationship (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014) with their audience (for example, see Subtheme 1). In previous research, spoken word writing was said to contain emotional resolution in order to free audience members from the burdens of “poets’ emotional baggage” (Alvarez & Mearns, 2014, p. 267). However, in the current analysis, certain forms of queer expression appear to break with this interpretation. Specifically, the performance of poetry with traumatic tones or content was, at times, regarded as a unidirectional or asymmetrical experience, with the audience ‘feeding’ off poets’ emotional performances. While a novel finding overall, it has been suggested that “coming to terms with trauma does not have to be shameful, and in fact this experience is seen as so valuable that, as strange as it sounds, people pay admission to be part of the therapeutic process” (Maddalena,

2009, p. 229). This phrasing suggests perplexing and significant nuances were left unexplored. The current research worked to fill this gap, as this “valuable” yet “strange” ritual of affliction was interpreted as a form of ‘painfotainment,’ which shed new light on the experience of ‘trauma sharing.’ Notions of asymmetry are meaningful from a queer theory perspective and, as such, link with the ‘rhetoric’ of the queer counter-public, as these artistic manifestations can be seen as sustaining “the significance of ‘deviation’ in what makes queer lives queer” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 161).

Intriguingly, queer trauma appeared to hold a powerful resonance for (mostly left-leaning; Somers-Willett, 2005) spoken word attendees. Through their ongoing participation in these rituals of affliction, poets could discern which suffering expressions engendered a particularly emotional response. It was suggested that in the game of slam “suffering with the strongest currency is that which is traumatic, verifiable, and/or significant” (Willen, 2010, p. 517). However, due to the invisibilities surrounding trauma and social suffering, the validity of poets’ experiences may be challenged (Kleinman, 1995), and as a result, some poets may have felt pressure to melodramatize their ‘symptoms.’ Hence, a figurative discourse of ‘blood shedding’ had emerged in the subculture, likely because it “bears the marks of trauma” (Willen, 2010, p. 507). Interestingly, this finding mirrors research with chronic pain patients who, for example, dramatize their suffering by ‘grading’ it a “twelve out of ten” (Kleinman’s, 1995, p. 133) to their practitioners. Thus, cutting edge theory and research on social ‘pathologies’ and ‘social suffering’ (see Good, Fischer, Willen, & DeVecchio Good, 2010) aided a richer understanding of this mode of experience, which had appeared to come under larger menacing societal pressures (Kleinman, 1995). For example, through the lens of Foucault’s bio-power, the

social system of slam poetry could be held accountable for ‘painfotainment,’ rather than individual poets who had fallen victim to structural inequalities and symbols of power.

Compared to other forms of *Outspoken* expression, poets placed tight restrictions on ‘healthy’ queer trauma sharing and, in particular, queer blood shedding. While ‘painfotainment’ was positioned as subcultural taboo, the therapeutic benefits and costs of these unique and unconventional rituals of affliction are still largely unknown. Could both the poetry and the social dramas that played out at spoken word be a valuable source of cathartic release of tension for participants (Geertz, 1972; Turner, 1974)? Moreover, the sense of kinship born of identification with fellow sufferers was generally eclipsed by participants. Yet, a “traumatic citizenship” (James, 2010, p. 491) was indicated in poets’ rhetoric and “political emotion” (Willen, 2010, p. 513), for example in the ways they had a common cause (i.e., queer affliction and subjugation) against a common foe (i.e., a repressive binary regime and homo- and transnegativity). As Jackson (2010, p. 140) observed of traumatic citizenship: “No matter what the wound, it is easier to act as one of many who have been victims of a historical wrong than it is to act as the isolated and sole victim of a personal slight.” Moreover, cultural responses to trauma that highlight the “commonality of affliction” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 31) are a crucial step in recognizing traumas (e.g., sexual assault) that tend to go unrecognized. As stated in the opening lines of this research, the *meaning* of expressions that are “emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively intense” (Dolan, 2006, p. 165) require further scrutinizing.

7.1 Limitations

This qualitative research on queer spoken word poets brought fresh insights into the broader areas of culture, health, and human development, but there are limitations to reflect upon

as well. While conventions and standards for quality control are less established for qualitative than quantitative methodologies, there are various codes of practice researchers can follow to demonstrate the value and intellectual integrity of their work (Yardley, 2000). Generally, qualitative researchers sacrifice breadth for depth of research (Smith & Osborn, 2008); thus, in-depth interviews with 20 participants was, by many accounts, a sufficient sample size. Through my immersion in the field, it was apparent there were numerous poets who met my eligibility requirements; however, I chose to terminate data collection at 20 interviews as I wanted to avoid ‘drowning’ in data (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Indeed, my original research design included supplementary techniques of participant observation, ethnographic field notes, and gathering textual poetry that were to become raw data to be analyzed. However, the primary source of data (i.e., one-on-one semi-structured interviews) proved highly effective (i.e., rich and detailed data), and as such, supplementary material was more so used as a triangulating data source to engage with on an *ad hoc* basis in order to enrich the qualitative evidence. While this adaptation was not necessarily a weakness of the research, it serves an important reminder of the goal to provide deep, complex, and sustained engagement with the data in the time available (Braun & Clarke, 2013). While the analysis followed recommendations by including plentiful raw data (i.e., extracts), an even distribution of data extracts across participants, and a comprehensive analysis of these data (Braun & Clarke, 2013), I could have arguably gone even deeper into each participant’s lifeworld with a *smaller* sample size. In short, the research design was, perhaps, on the ambitious side, but adjustments were carried out with relative ease.

Another limitation of this research was the gap in time from data collection (i.e., 2016 to 2017) to analysis (i.e., 2021 to 2022). While my integral involvement at each and every stage of

research surely helped to buffer against attrition, the time lag arguably detracts from the timeliness of the topic, particularly because of the challenges a global pandemic (i.e., COVID-19) might have caused to an already transient and ill-defined community (Chepp, 2012). However, as mentioned, the research findings provide further implications for the study of culture, health, and human development, with specific insights for those with marginal identities, particularly queer-identified individuals. Furthermore, social and temporal distancing from both the data and the community allowed for extended rumination on the data and topic. This estrangement may have helped to safeguard against the “seductive trap” (Corin, 2010, p. 110) of “a hermeneutics of empathy” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 181), as I routinely invoked my critical orientation to call into question axiomatic meanings of the phenomenon under investigation (Crotty, 1998).

Triangulation – in the classic sense of gaining accuracy through multiple independent measures – was incompatible with the epistemological (i.e., social constructionism) and ontological (i.e., critical realism) foundations of this research. I did not employ a team of researchers to develop the analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013), nor did I systematically engage in dialogue with other researchers to gain greater clarity (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). Instead, my commitment and rigour were enhanced through my: a) prolonged engagement with the topic; b) development of competency in methods and skills; and c) immersion in the empirical data (Yardley, 2000). As a means of transparency, original audio recordings, orthographic transcripts, and coded data have been kept on file and could be made accessible to other analysts, should a request be made to review this material.

7.2 Implications and Future Directions

Spoken word poetry is a thoroughly social phenomenon, and thus, intersubjectivity proved a crucial lifeworld feature to probe in this exploratory research. For example, the subtheme of ‘painforainment’ identifies the audience as a prominent feature of poets’ psychological situation (Ashworth, 2015). By definition, poets are also audience members, but the central aim of this research was to explore interviewees’ roles as poets. A critical reading of limited data suggested audience members were less burdened by expressions of suffering on stage than the participants professed. Future researchers could prioritize the audience’s lifeworld in order to open up a complex – though still partial (Braun & Clarke, 2013) – understanding of these enigmatic yet profound rituals of affliction. For example, the “pragmatics of illness narratives” (Good, 1994, p. 158), with their dialogical and intersubjective quality, were clearly evidenced in the data. Poets emphasized a culture of stigmatization, low self-esteem, and emotional dependency (Yardley, 2000) surrounding the phenomenon of queer blood shedding; however, this research-in-context suggested the meaning and function of these socio-cultural processes require further investigation. Given the request by one participant for clinical workers in the community of spoken word, another avenue for future researchers to consider is participatory action research (Braun & Clarke, 2013), in which researchers seek to explain existing problems and create new solutions (Yardley, 2000).

In the future, I may also consider “doing representation differently” (Berbary, 2011, p. 195); namely, through Creative Analytical Practice (CAP), I could create and share spoken word poetry that is based upon the research findings (e.g., one poem per theme). This poetry format could offer new, exciting, and accessible ways to disseminate the research findings. CAP benefits the topic of this research, as this representation could afford ways to reimagine “art as research, research as art” (Berbary, 2011, p. 195).

The ultimate value and utility of any research depends on the impacts made upon its readership. Findings from Theme 1 have practical import for the study of subcultures, as a deep probing of poets' lifeworld revealed particular 'quandaries' (i.e., parochialisms) that counter-public literature – a relatively new theory of the public sphere (A. Johnson, 2009) – has yet to explore in much detail. Research findings are also useful for scholars in the area of LGBTQ+ or those involved in an outreach capacity, such as those who work in queer resource centres. By privileging the subject as a starting point, this research rendered a clearer picture of those who live outside the gender norm (Fryer, 2003). For example, 'queer omnipresence' produced many theoretically rich findings (e.g., 'liminalities') that are relevant to research pursuits with, and academic courses on, LGBTQ+-identified people. Lastly, while still an incomplete explanation (Yardley, 2000), 'queer affliction' presented empirical material on a novel and complex psychological phenomenon. The cathartic benefits and drawbacks of queer 'trauma sharing' and 'painforainment,' for example, have clear and far-ranging implications for the health and well-being of queer-identified people.

The theme of 'queer affliction' displays how data can lead qualitative researchers in a direction that they would not have anticipated (Corin, 2010). A major unresolved question of this research revolves around the effects of queer 'trauma sharing.' While many interviewees viewed these traumatic expressions as an unhealthy 'issue' of the 'queer counter-public,' this taken-for-granted assumption requires further phenomenological critique, as doing so "may well have an emancipating effect" (Farber, 1991, p. 234). Further research into the various effects of queer trauma should help to determine whether members of artistic communities or counter-publics are emotionally equipped to withstand these performances, and if so, what their merit might entail.

To this end, further research on the cathartic benefits, as well as the potential pitfalls, of queer 'trauma sharing' and 'painfotainment' is urgently needed.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The topic of spoken word poetry is vastly under-researched and, as such, little is known about spoken word poets with minority identities, many of them “young people of colour and queers and other marginalized people” (Dolan, 2006, p. 169). This is, perhaps, no coincidence, as scholars note that various ‘weapons’ employed by the ‘weak’ to combat systems of power are conveniently omitted from public historical record (Chepp, 2012). Indeed, while “meaningful and palpable” the “ephemerality of queer communities and counter-publics” (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 166) has elided them from much scholarly inquiry (Chávez, 2011; Halberstam, 2005; Muñoz, 1999). By probing various aspects of existence that are susceptible to (empirical) invisibilities, including queer women (Butler, 1990; Castle, 1993; Halberstam, 2005); counter-publics (Chepp, 2012; Fraser, 1992; Muñoz, 1999); and trauma (Cvetkovich, 2003), the qualitative research conducted herein aimed to understand and, ultimately, preserve the ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott, 1990) of queer art worlds.

Nevertheless, it is wise to avoid the potential dangers of romanticism (Craig, 2006). The intent should not be to “glorify resistance to oppression, but rather to understand resistance as adumbrating our possibilities” (Lugones, 2003, p. 31) in the “direction of deep coalition” (p. 98). Previous scholarship has generally placed focus on “the beneficial nature of spoken word poetry and/or slam poetry” (Schoppelrei, 2019, p. 80), leaving alternative interpretations unexplored (Crotty, 1998). As a critical qualitative investigation, the current study on spoken word poets’ lived experiences charted the fleeting “promise of queer” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 106) and, as such, resisted the reductive search for permanence or the idealization of queer worlds.

To do so, I employed an experience-near methodology with 20 queer-identified women and non-binary spoken word poets. One-on-one, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews aided

reflexive articulations that, ultimately, helped to expose deep, rhythmical structures of meanings. This analytic approach directed my focus to numerous ‘fractions’ of poets’ lifeworld (Ashworth, 2015), including: selfhood, sociality, embodiment, temporality, spatiality, personal project, mood as atmosphere, and the “stylistic dimension of discourse” (Corin, 2010, p. 115). While I listened intently to participants’ experiences in their own words in order to develop empathic understanding, my critical stance led me to contemplate the “underlying premises and coordinates” (Corin, 2010, p. 110). In this sense, I was able to think simultaneously through participants’ lived experience *and* “recognize the reality of discursive production and social-linguistic determination” (Fryer, 2003, p. 158).

This research impulse entailed a commitment to “action-in-contraction” (Barnard, 1996, p. 89), thereby evading the perils of demystification. By celebrating the elusiveness of an art practice, this study upheld both qualitative and queer values, such as the ethos to contest hegemony (i.e., dominant and conventionalized categorization) (Barnard, 1996). In order to better serve future generations of marginal and oppressed people, we will do well to study *Outspoken* expression, whether seemingly mundane; cheerful and celebratory; or riddled with explicit traumas and oppressions (Cvetkovich, 2003; Maddalena, 2009). As a qualitative inquirer, I invariably searched for meaning and understanding; even while fully aware that what surfaced was sure to be ‘rife with ambiguity’ (Patton, 2002).

Notes

1. With time restrictions and higher stakes, poets often rehearse for a slam (Somers-Willett, 2005).
2. The influence of African American expressive vernacular culture (Fisher, 2003) is more pronounced in some locations than others.
3. Resistance may be defined as opposition or “active struggle” against power and injustice that may include “less dramatic daily experiences of suffering” (Kleinman, 1995, p. 126).
4. By politics, I refer to the Greek etymology, *politikos*, which involves negotiations in a pluralist world: people of differing views, interests, backgrounds, etc. interacting to accomplish some task (Chepp, 2012).
5. Identity politics are generally understood as political arguments that focus on the interests and perspectives of groups with which people identify.
6. Supplementary material was inductively created (i.e., fieldnotes) or selected (i.e., textual data) on an ad hoc basis. I attempted to take fieldnotes at every poetry event I attended during data collection (i.e., Intervals #1-3). I aimed to select 20 pieces of textual poetry; that is, one for every poet interviewed.
7. Regarding pseudonyms, I asked participants, verbally and in writing (i.e., in the consent form), if their name or stage name (if applicable) may be represented in the final research. Past research is roughly split on the issue: some scholars assigned “fictitious names to the spoken word poets in order to protect their anonymity” (Chepp, 2012, p. 245); others noted the inherent challenge of securing anonymity (for example, in small communities). Gregory (2008), for example, chose to “credit [her participants] for their statements” (p. 79), save for a few poets who preferred a pseudonym. Since I was using

selected public poetry/performances as supplementary textual data, I wished to “use their real names out of respect for their artistic productions” (Fields et al., 2014, p. 315).

However, the primary source of data (i.e., one-on-one semi-structured interviews) proved so effective that this supplementary material was used more as triangulating device in order to paint a rich and complex portrait of the participants’ lives, and less as raw data to be analyzed. With this technique adapted in the final research design, the draw toward pseudonyms was much stronger, particularly with unanticipated emergent findings which could be interpreted as having sensitive content (e.g., mental health challenges, community issues). Ultimately, I chose to follow the general recommendation in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013): to use pseudonyms.

8. Following the work of Husserl, Fryer (2003, p. 154) defines “protentive and retentive horizons” as temporal arenas that approach (i.e., protentive) and recede (i.e., retentive) as we navigate our way through the world. These invariant structures of the lifeworld mark possibilities for how we constitute the world as intentional agents of experience. (See Chapter 7 for further discussion on protentive and retentive horizons.)

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Appendix A: Personal Theoretical Framework

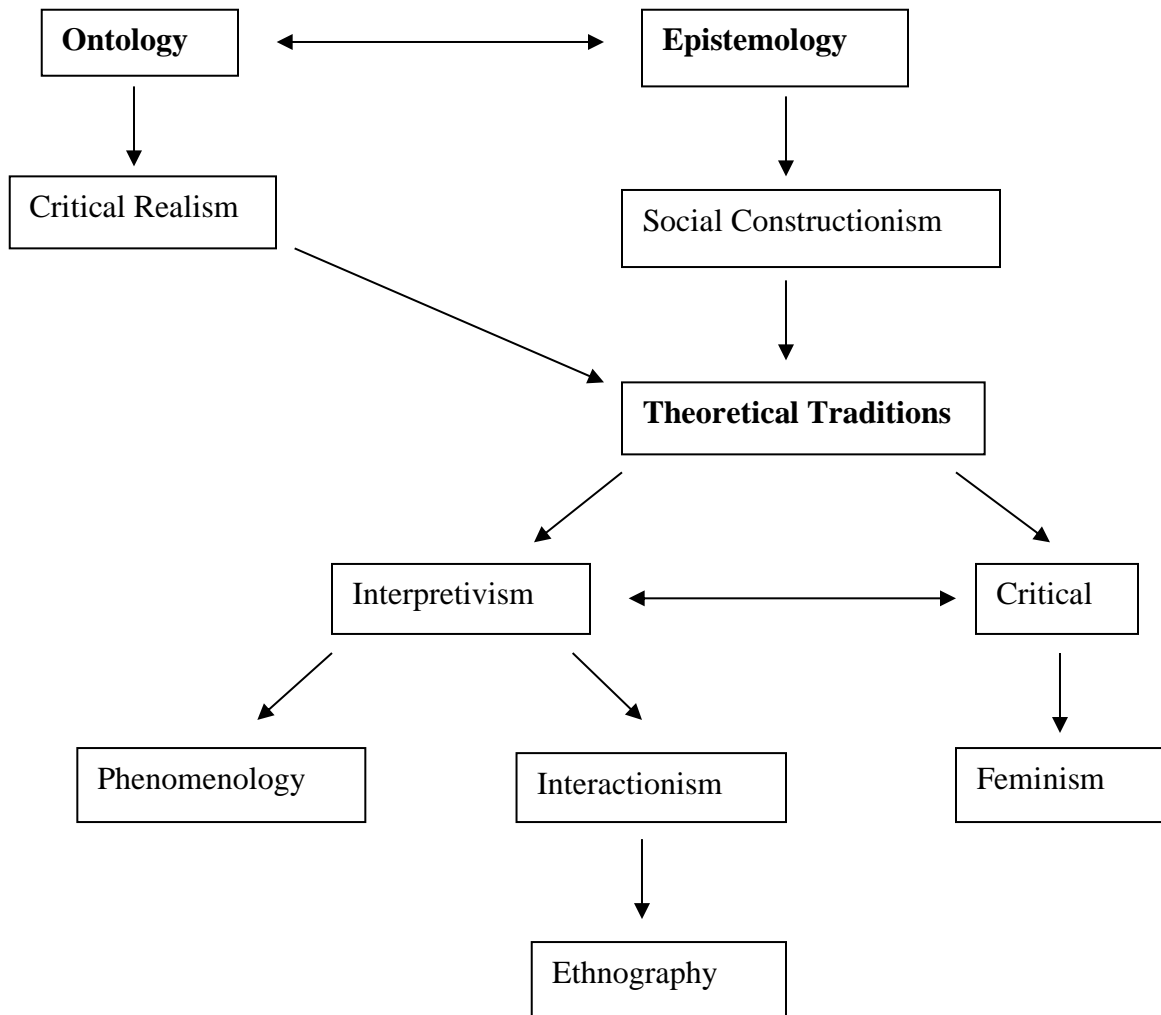


Figure 1. diagrammatic representation of the theoretical/foundational aspects of the research

Appendix B: Consent Form



Participant Consent Form

Project Title: The Lifeworld of Lesbian and Queer Women Spoken Word Poets

Researcher: Elly-Jean Nielsen, graduate student (PhD candidate), Department of Psychology, University of Saskatchewan, elly-jean.nielsen@usask.ca

Supervisor: Todd G. Morrison, PhD, Department of Psychology, todd.morrison@usask.ca

Purpose of the Research:

- The purpose of this study is to explore lesbian and queer women's experiences as spoken word poets.
- Involvement in this study will require the completion of: 1) a very short demographics sheet; and 2) participation in a one-on-one interview with the student researcher (approximately one to two hours in duration). The interview will be audio-recorded and transcribed at a later date. Anything you say is completely confidential and, if you choose to do so, all data collected will be identified with a pseudonym unrelated to your identifying information.
- The data will be used toward the completion of the student researcher's PhD dissertation, including submissions for publication and academic and non-academic presentations.
- Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

Funded by: This research has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada

Potential Risks:

- There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.
- You are a volunteer and free to withdraw or stop responding at any time. If at any point you do not wish to continue, you are under no obligation to do so and may leave. In the event that taking part in this study causes you stress or concern, you may call HealthLine at 1-877-800-0002 or the Trevor Project helpline at 1-866-488-7386 or <http://www.thetrevorproject.org>.

Potential Benefits:

- Although you may receive no benefit from participating in this study, you may gain further insight on: 1) your experiences as a spoken word artist; and/or 2) how research in the social sciences is conducted.

Confidentiality:

- The data and consent forms will be stored securely by the student researcher and her supervisor; they are the only two individuals who will have access to the data. When the data are no longer required (five years post publication), they will be destroyed. Additional interactions with the researchers will also remain confidential.

- If the research is published or presented, direct quotations (taken from the interviews) may be used. Confidentiality can be waived if you would like to be acknowledged for your contributions (i.e., your statements and artistic productions). Also, because the participants for this research project have been selected from a relatively small group of people, many of whom are known to each other, it is possible that you may be identifiable to others on the basis of what you have said. After your interview, and prior to the data being included in the final report, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview, and to add, alter, or delete information as you see fit.
- There are two options for you to consider if you decide to take part in this research. Please put a check mark on the corresponding line that grants me your permission to:

1. Remain anonymous, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym: Yes: ___ No: ___

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: _____

2. You may quote me and use my name: Yes: ___ No: ___

Name (or 'stage name', if applicable): _____

Right to Withdraw:

- Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions with which you are comfortable. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort.
- Should you wish to withdraw, you may choose to destroy your data: 1) in their entirety; or 2) partially (i.e., the parts you wish to be destroyed).
- Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until September 1st, 2017. After this, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

Follow up:

- To obtain results from the study, please feel welcome to contact the researchers by e-mail at elly-jean.nielsen@usask.ca or todd.morrison@usask.ca.

Questions or Concerns:

- If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any point. You are also free to contact the researchers at the e-mail addresses provided above if you have questions at a later time.
- This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board on (insert date). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office (Toll Free: 888-966-2975).

Consent to Participate:

- Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the document. I have had opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. I have been given a copy of this Consent Form for my records.

Name of Participant _____
Signature _____
Date

Researcher's Signature _____
Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

Appendix C: Debriefing Form



The Lifeworld of Lesbian and Queer Women Spoken Word Poets

Dear Participant:

Thank you for participating in this study. Your responses will help us to better understand the nature of current artistic endeavours of lesbian and queer women.

There has been no research conducted on this topic to date. Hence, the overarching goal of this study is to explore the experiences of lesbian and queer women spoken word poets.

The interview questions that you answered were designed to focus on three main areas. First, to get an initial sense of your experiences, questions were asked about your history as a spoken word poet and the specific community of artists to which you belong. Second, to gain a deeper sense of your identity as an artist and as lesbian/queer woman, identity-based questions were asked of you. The third and final area included more specific questions regarding gender and sexuality in your artistic community. We also wished to explore your experiences with disclosing various identities through art and on stage.

Thank you very much again for your time and participation. Once ready and available, the results of this study can be requested via e-mail by contacting Elly-Jean Nielsen using the information below. Although unanticipated, if you find yourself experiencing any distress or anxiety as a result of participating in this study, please contact call the HealthLine at 1-877-800-0002 or the Trevor Project helpline at 1-866-488-7386 or <http://www.thetrevorproject.org>. If you have any concerns regarding the ethical conduct of this study, please contact the Research Ethics Board.

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Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Poet's experience with spoken word

A. Spoken word poetry

1) Could you provide me with a brief history of your experiences with spoken word poetry?

Prompts: When did you start performing your poetry (instead of just writing it)? How consistent has your involvement been? Where have you performed/competed?

2) What sorts of topics does your poetry cover?

3) How would you describe the transformation from written poem to spoken performance?

Prompts: How have your experiences shaped and changed through becoming art/poetry?

4) How do you feel when you are performing?

Probes: Physically, emotionally, and mentally.

5) What is your spoken word style?

6) How does the space you perform in affect your performance?

7) How would you describe your specific local spoken word communities/collectives?

8) How would you characterize your feelings toward spoken word compared with slam?

Prompts: How do your performances change depending on the context (i.e., open mic vs. slam)?

B. Identity

9) If you had to describe what spoken word poetry means to you, what would you say?

Prompts: What words come to mind? What images?

10) How has being a poet and a performer made a difference on how you see yourself?

11) How do your sexual and gender identities factor into this vision of yourself as an artist?

Prompts: What makes you unique as a queer spoken word artist?

C. Coming out on stage/through art – to be queer in spoken word

13) How do you, if you do, express your queer identity through your poetry?

14) How does the relative (in)visibility of being queer bear on your decision to “come out” in your poems and on stage?

Probes: style, words, dress, and presence.

15) What are the advantages, if any, of expressing your queer identity/experiences on stage?

Probes: for you, for the audience, and for greater society.

16) What are the disadvantages, if any, of expressing your queer identity/experiences on stage?

Prompts: Can you describe any experiences with homophobia or heterosexism?

17) How does the audience react to your ‘coming out’?

Prompts: Can you describe any particular audience reactions? Do people ever approach you after your performance?

18) Do you feel a greater need to discuss queer topics through your art, and on stage, for any reasons?

Prompts: Are you politically motivated in any way?

19) How do you, as a provider of art and knowledge in your community, deal with any ignorance or homophobia?

20) How do your queer expressions in everyday life differ from those when in the poetry community?

21) How would you change the spoken word community with respect to your queer artistic expressions? What would you keep the same?

22) What are your thoughts on the initiatives to have “women-only” or “queer-only” events?

23) What advice would you give to a young queer poet who was feeling conflicted about discussing her/their queer identity (or identities) on stage?

24) *As a pair, select one poem from a chapbook and/or on YouTube (preferably with queer content) and discuss: a) the meanings of the poem itself; b) feelings while writing/performing it; and, c) any goals or objectives of writing/performing this piece.

Appendix E: Transcription Notation System

- “...” pauses
- “[]” used to add descriptive detail, such as background noise or poet’s expression
- “–” indicates an interruption in speech/talking over one another
- “[?]” used when audio recording is difficult to interpret/inaudible

Appendix F: Thematic Map

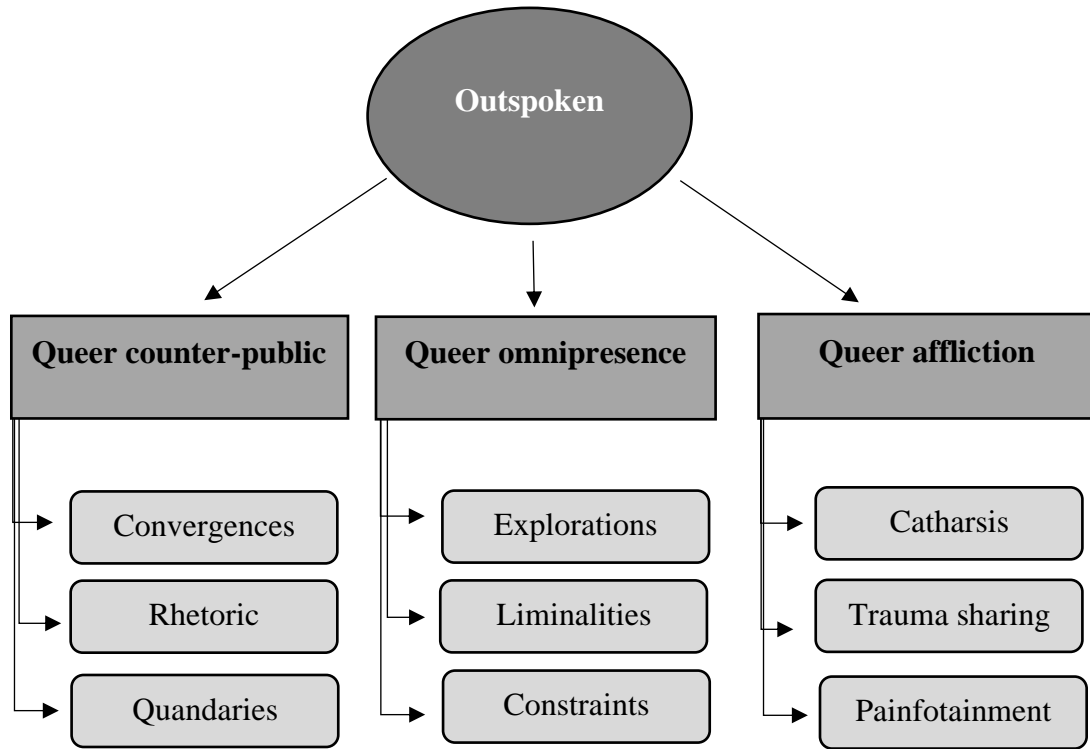


Figure 2. diagrammatic representation of overarching themes, themes, and subthemes